Extending Learning beyond Classroom through Parent Education via E-Mails in Pre-School English Language Education*

Pınar Kahveci[1]

[1]*Sinop University (TURKEY)*

Abstract

Extending learning beyond classroom is necessary in pre-school language education because very young learners learn and forget quickly. Involving parents in teaching process may be a good way to extend language learning beyond classroom. Therefore, this study aims to understand parents' attitudes towards parent education in teaching English to very young learners. The study is significant in the sense that the idea of educating parents in language learning through e-mails may be promising for increasing quality in teaching English to very young learners. Survey research method was used in the study. Survey on Attitudes Towards Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners developed by the researcher was used as the research instrument. The data were collected from eight parents who received instruction on English language teaching through e-mails during six months. The e-mails they received on a weekly basis contained the content of what their children have learned in the classroom and suggested language learning activities to be applied at home. The steps of the activities were simply outlined. Carefully selected language learning visuals and links for useful websites were also provided in the e-mails. The results indicated that parent education via e-mails generated a positive impact on parents' integration to teaching English. It was seen that parents were positive about the content of e-mails. They also found the suggested activities applicable at home. Similarly, they felt confident about continuing teaching English to their kids at home. In addition, parents' gender, education or English language proficiency did not have any significant effect on their attitudes towards parent education in teaching English to very young learners. Given these results, it is possible to suggest that pre-school language teachers, administrators and curriculum developers should integrate parent education into teaching English to very young learners programs.

Keywords: English language teaching, very young learners, parent education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to very young learners (TEVYL) has some challenges considering their nature. They are enthusiastic learners who learn and forget quickly. Therefore, they need language learning activities that involve physical action and considerable amount of repetition. In addition, they have a short concentration span. It is important to use a variety of activities that challenge their creativity so that they will not get bored easily. Similarly, the fact that very young learners are digital natives (Prensky, 2001)[1] contributes to the challenge of creating effective language learning environments for them. They ask for more engagement with Internet, videos and digital content. Watching a video of the traditional kids' story "Goldilocks and Three Bears" sounds a lot more exciting to them than listening to the story from their teacher. These characteristics of very young learners require extending learning beyond classroom. The teachers may be doing their best to make the most of classroom teaching; however, very young learners need constant scaffolding that should be provided outside classroom, too.

1.1 Research Question

The researcher aims to understand parents' attitudes towards parent education in language learning process. In addition, the study attempts to understand if there are significant correlations among parents' attitudes towards parent education and variables such as gender, education and language proficiency.

1.1.1 Significance and Limitations of the Study

Educating parents in TEVYL to extend learning beyond classroom may hold significance in terms of making learning more retainable for learners. Similarly, the study is significant because it attempts to analyse parents' attitudes towards their involvement in learning process. The results may give an idea about the effectiveness and applicability of parent education.

**8th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies*
4-6 July, 2016 Barcelona, Spain- EDULEARN16 Proceedings. Pages: 1499-1505, Publication year: 2016 /ISBN: 978-84-608-8860-4/ ISSN: 2340-1117 / doi: 10.21125/edulearn.2016.0130

The small number of participants, which is only eight, is one of the limitations of the study. Out of sixteen parents, who received the e-mails weekly, only eight parents participated in the survey.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.1 Who are very young learners?

Very young learners, aged between 3 and 5 years old, are active language learners who need hands-on, concrete experiences (Donaldson,1978) [2] to retain what they have learned. Similarly, very young learners have relatively short concentration spans. They learn and forget quickly. Keeping these characteristics of them in mind, very young learner teachers need to create various opportunities for revisiting the same learning material at different times and in different contexts. It is a familiar experience to most very young learner teachers that their learners act like as if they have never been exposed to what they seemed to have mastered the previous week when it is time for revision the following week. Involving parents in language learning process is, in this respect, a step into providing the redundancy that very young learners need to master the input they are exposed to in the classroom.

Very young learners are also very inquisitive; they love asking questions about everything. It was discovered that pre-schoolers asked a lot more questions at home than they asked at kindergarten (Tizard&Hughes,1984) [3]. Equipping parents' with knowledge and skills to create a language learning environment at home can help parents answer their children's questions about what they have been exposed to in the classroom confidently.

Very young learners do not possess literacy skills yet. Thus, they are mainly dependent on visual and aural input for learning. Exposing learners to correct aural input is of great importance because, they are like tape-recorders. However, they do not only record what they hear, they also experiment with it and create reformulations to puzzle it out for themselves (Wells,1999) [4], which shows that they construct knowledge through a hypothesis testing process. The visual materials selection process requires a word of caution, too. Very young learners may be sensitive to what they see and criticize what they do not like harshly. The visuals used in a very young learner classroom need to be clear, lively and easy to understand. Similarly, it might be a good idea to employ drawings, smiles and comics instead of photos of real people and objects.

Cooperative work and group activities may not work well with very young learners, because they are still ego-centric. They prefer playing on their own side by side rather than playing and sharing together at the same time. They are kinaesthetic learners; they need plenty of physical activity in the classroom. Teachers need to be careful about using physical and cool-down activities at the right time and with a balanced emphasis on both types of activities. In addition, it is important to remember that very young learners may spend a lot of time only listening before they produce any plausible language as based on Winitz's (1981) [5] Comprehension Approach principle that reception precedes production.

Raising parents' awareness about the basics of TEVYL through parent education may be an effective tool for connecting classroom and home, which is needed to create optimal learning environment for very young learners. Parents' engagement in language learning process may offer a number of advantages both for learners, teachers and parents. Learning may be extended beyond classroom, which provides more chances for repetition that young learners need because they learn and forget quickly. Similarly, it might be cool-down strategy for parents when they have difficulty with meeting their children's need for physical action.

2.1.2 Why is Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners Needed?

Working effectively with parents is a challenge for English language teachers of very young learners. However, this issue has not been discussed adequately in literature (Linse, van Vlack& Bladas, 2014) [6]. While difficult parents are considered to be a challenge for very young learner teachers (Garton et al,2011) [7] and the driving force behind the demand for English to be taught at school at earlier ages (Enever &Moon, 2009) [8]; further discussion on these issues are not provided.

Establishing a two-way communication channel between teachers and parents can increase both learners' and parents' motivation as they become active participants in learning and teaching process. This two-way communication channel can be facilitated in a number of ways; i.e., orally, face to face or on the phone, through written means of communication such as letters or digital communication means (Linse, van Vlack& Bladas, 2014) [6] such as e-mails, which was also the medium used in this

study. These methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Face to face conversations may be more interactive because parents will have the chance to ask questions and get immediate responses from the teacher while they do not have this opportunity in written or digital communication means. However, digital or written communication means are time-saving and easier to keep track of because they are recorded. In addition, both teachers and parents have the chance to think thoroughly before they communicate their ideas, which may hinder any possible miscommunications.

Parents' active participation in their children's English language learning process can increase both their and their children's self-confidence. Parents may feel more secure while dealing with their children's language learning process because suggestions and ideas come from a teaching professional. These suggestions and ideas may also foster their awareness and trigger their creativity to design additional language learning tasks at home. Similarly, children may also feel more secure because they go on learning at home, too. They may perceive language learning as a natural part of their daily routines if parents succeed in designing an optimal language learning environment at home, too.

Parents' willingness to know about their children's progress and their level of progress compared to their peers is a universal attitude (Linse, van Vlack& Bladas, 2014) [6]. Parent education may serve as an instrumental tool to help parents gain insight into their children's progress. In truth, parents may take control over their kids' language development because parent education puts them in teacher's role. It is fair to argue that parent education may create more autonomous parents and learners, because teaching and learning responsibility will also be shared while knowledge and skills in language teaching are being passed onto parents. This increased autonomy, which is a desired outcome of parent education, may help parents to get more confident about guiding their children's language learning process. Similarly, very young learners may feel more confident because language learning will become a regular routine for them thanks to language learning activities they are involved in at home.

2.1.3 Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners from Teachers' Perspective

One major concern for teachers is training on how to work with parents. The results of Linse, van Vlack and Bladas' 2014 report titled "Parents and young learners in language teaching: global practices and issues in school-home contacts" provide a comprehensive analysis of this concern. The research conducted in eight countries, i.e., Japan, Korea, Mexico, France, Spain, Philippines, Namibia and Bangladesh, revealed that most of the teachers did not receive any formal training on how to establish successful partnerships with parents. Similarly, teachers of very young learners in Turkey do not receive any formal instruction on how to work with parents because there are no courses that exclusively focus on parent-teacher communication within English language teacher education curriculums.

However, Linse, van Vlack and Bladas, (2014) [6] argue that there were some situations in which experienced teachers took on the role of mentors to provide training for less experienced teachers on how to communicate with parents. They add that novice teachers were generally frustrated with the fact that they did not know how to manage their relationships with parents and asked for help from more experienced colleagues. Their report also informs us that there are masters and post-graduate in-service programmes on school-home partnerships in some countries.

Another concern from teachers' perspective is the language of parent-teacher communication. A teacher may confidently prefer to use parents' native language when they have classroom with students who speak only one native language, which was the case in this study. The researcher communicated with parents in Turkish because all parents were native speakers of Turkish. However, it is not an unusual situation to have a classroom with speakers of various native languages because multilingualism is a common experience in a world where cultures merge. Teachers may face challenges while determining the language of communication with parents in these situations. Linse, van Vlack and Bladas, (2014) [6] conclude that respecting native languages is instrumental because of their contribution to English language learning process. They further argue that linguistic imperialism should be avoided.

The quality of communication between parents and teachers is of importance, too. Parent education should not be merely equipping parents with knowledge and skills, but parents should have a say in the process, too. Their contribution should be appreciated and used to improve the teacher-parent partnership. Teachers may regularly ask for parents' ideas and suggestions on improving the quality of

teaching in the classroom or extracurricular activities. Similarly, parents can be asked to provide a detailed profile of their children; e.g., information on their likes and dislikes, their learning habits at home, so that teachers can draw on this information while designing classroom activities and suggested activities to be done at home.

3 METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to analyze parents' attitudes towards their involvement in their children's English language learning process, survey research method was used. Research instrument was the Survey on Attitudes towards Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners developed by the researcher themselves. The survey consisted of 21 items with a 3-point Likert type scale on parents' attitudes and demographic information, i.e.; gender, language proficiency and education.

3.1.1 Participants and the Setting

Participants were eight parents whose children were instructed by the researcher themselves during 6 months, three hours a week. The parents were reached via e-mail and requested to participate in the online version of the Survey on Attitudes towards Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners. There were sixteen children in the classroom; however, only eight parents participated in the survey. The survey was administrated in Turkish which was the participants' native language. The study was carried out in Deniz Yıldızları Kindergarten at Sinop University, Sinop, Turkey during 2014-2015 Academic Year.

3.1.2 Treatment

Parent education in teaching English to very young learners was carried out through e-mails that they received on a weekly basis. This method was preferred to face to face meetings because it was time-saving for parents most of whom had busy schedules. In addition, the e-mails are accessible at anytime and anywhere that gives them the flexibility to resort to them when they need. It is also possible to send links for useful websites, videos to be used for language learning activities and audio-visual materials as e-mail attachments. Face to face meetings and interviews do not offer these advantages.

The weekly e-mails followed a pattern. The steps of the activities done in the classroom that week were outlined. A lexical syllabus was used by the instructor who was also the researcher; thus, the lexical items the learners were expected to learn were listed, too. Brief information on learning goals, teaching methods used and assessment techniques was also given to raise parents' awareness of the purpose of the activities. The activities done in the classroom and suggested activities were designed to facilitate multisensory and hands-on learning with the help of songs, games, storytelling, act-outs, role plays and Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. In addition to giving information on the content and methodology of the lessons, additional activities that could be done at home were also suggested. These activities were explained simply step by step to avoid any confusion because not all parents were expected to be educational experts. When needed, links for useful language learning websites, song and storytelling videos and visual materials in PDF format were also attached to these e-mails. The e-mails were written in Turkish, which is parents' native language, so as to avoid any communication failures.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is understood from the results that parents generally have positive attitudes towards parent education in TEVYL. Parent education via weekly e-mails has contributed to making them more aware of language learning and teaching processes. The results of Pearson Correlation test did not reveal any significant positive or negative correlations among parents' attitudes towards parent education and their gender, language proficiency and education. In other words, these variables did not have any significant effect on their attitudes.

The results indicate that parent education raised parents' awareness about teaching English to very young learners. Out of eight parents who participated in the survey, six parents strongly agreed that they had theoretical knowledge about language teaching and they could use this knowledge for practical purposes. It can be argued that weekly e-mails contributed to making parents confident about their knowledge and skills in teaching English to very young learners, considering the fact that only one parent, who is an English teacher already, received formal training on language education.

Parents might have felt more confident to state that they 'know how to teach English' after they have received e-mails that give information on learning goals, the steps of applying a language activity and appropriate language learning materials.

Seven out of eight parents indicated that they did research about teaching English and created language learning opportunities for their children at home. It can be argued that the weekly e-mails also motivated them to know more about teaching English to their children at home. Parents might have grown more enthusiastic about taking responsibility for their children's language learning as their children asked them for more opportunities for language learning.

Parents can judge whether their children are learning English or not based on some indicators. Similarly, they can formulate ideas on how language should be taught. The results show that parents have reasonable ideas about what the indicators of language learning are and how classroom atmosphere is supposed to be. All of the eight parents who participated in the survey agreed that the atmosphere in an English as a foreign language classroom should be warm, fun and free. Similarly, seven out of eight parents indicated that they judge their kids' progress in learning English based on both their responses to aural instructions and oral production while only one parent strongly disagreed with this idea. On the other hand, six parents strongly disagreed that they judge their kids' progress based only on their oral production, while two of them were neutral about this item. It is understood that parents have grown aware that children should proceed from reception to production without being forced to produce language to show that they are learning.

It is seen that parents have come to realize that very young learners should not be forced to speak unless they are ready as shown by the result that seven of them agreed with this statement. The nature of suggested language activities in the e-mails that prioritizes reception might have helped parents gain insights about this point. However, two parents indicated that they strongly agreed that children should be forced to speak to show that they were learning while two parents were neutral about this assumption. It is understood that some parents still considered oral production a must even at earlier stages of language learning, failing to recognize the crucial role of 'silent period' that very young learners need before they start producing language. It can be argued that some parents may have firmly-established ideas that may come from their own schooling experience or some myths about language learning spread by people who are not professionals in teaching English to very young learners. These firmly-established ideas may be difficult to change despite various efforts to help parents gain useful insights into teaching English to very young learners.

Parent education may also serve as a tool to increase parents' self-confidence about being a part of their children's language learning process, which is one of the expected outcomes of this study. Six parents strongly agreed that articles, conferences and online applications about language learning aroused their interest. However, one parent strongly disagreed and one of them was neutral about this item. Similarly, five parents strongly agreed that they could use the online applications and websites without teachers' guidance while three of them indicated they were not sure they could do it. It can be argued that parents' confidence about teaching English to their kids might have increased as a result of the guidance they have been provided in e-mails. The fact that five parents were confident enough to create language learning opportunities for their children at home without teacher's guidance may imply that parent education in language learning has contributed to their autonomy when they take on the role of language teacher at home.

Parents' ideas about the quality of weekly e-mails were positive in general. All of the eight parents strongly agreed that the weekly e-mails gave them a clear idea about what their children learned in the classroom. None of the parents found weekly e-mails long and boring. In addition, they all strongly agreed that they devoted time to reading the weekly e-mails and the language used in the e-mails was clear and explicable. The suggested language learning activities were found to be simple and applicable at home by all eight parents. Likewise, all of the eight parents found suggested language learning materials attached to e-mails explicable, effective and up-to-date. They all agreed that involving their children in activities suggested in the e-mails contributed to their children's progress in learning English.

Children's degree of willingness to participate in these activities done at home differed. Out of eight parents, five of them strongly agreed that their children were always willing to do the language learning activities, while three of them were not sure that their kids always showed interest in these activities.

Parents' suggestions on the content of the e-mails were also one of the concerns of the study. All parents strongly agreed that they would like to see photos or audio-recordings of the lessons attached

to e-mails. Similarly, six parents strongly agreed that they would like to see the videos of the lessons as an e-mail attachment while two of them stated that they were neutral about this idea. One can argue that parents were concerned about increasing the quality of feedback and guidance they get from e-mails and they expected more.

Sustainability is another concern of the study. Parents' ability to continue designing and applying language learning activities without any guidance, which was provided through e-mails in this study, is the key to sustainability. All parents strongly agreed that they could apply the suggested language activities effectively on their own. In addition, six parents strongly agreed that they could design and apply new activities based on their experience from the weekly e-mails while two parents were not sure that they could do it. These results indicate that via e-mails process. Increased autonomy of parents is promising because parents' collaboration may be considered as one of the key factors in increasing quality of teaching English to very young learners.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Elusive nature of very young learners makes extending learning beyond classroom a requirement. As discussed previously, very young learners learn and forget quickly. They are enthusiastic learners who need redundancy to learn. This study envisages parents' collaboration as an effective tool that can help with providing this redundancy. All in all, it can be argued that parents who participated in the study developed positive attitudes towards training they received through e-mails. They were satisfied with the content of the e-mails and thought that the-mails were useful and worth reading because applying the suggested language learning activities at home fostered their children's progress in language learning.

Results from the Survey on Attitudes towards Parent Education in Teaching English to Very Young Learners reveal that parent education via weekly e-mails has generated positive attitudes in parents. It can be argued that they have enjoyed being a part of their kids' learning process. Taking on the role of teacher at home gives them confidence and motivation. Similarly, guidance provided in e-mails may be an effective tool to foster their children's English language learning process. Similarly, parent education may help parents gain insights about the nature of language teaching. Their increased awareness about teaching English to very young learners contributes to their autonomy as 'language teachers at home'.

Parent education contributes to teaching and learning English to very young learners both from teachers' and learners' perspective in a number of ways. Firstly, learners have repetition that they need as the activities done in the classroom are repeated at home. Learners may view learning a language a natural part of their lives as they do it at home, too. Secondly, parents' collaboration with language teachers leads to a shared responsibility for teaching and learning. Parents may not have to depend on only teachers to be informed of their children's progress. In truth, taking on teachers' role at home, they can have plenty of chances to observe their kids' progress in learning English themselves. Thirdly, parents may grow more confident because they can choose and apply activities to teach English to their kids based on the ideas they get from guidance provided in e-mails. Parent education via e-mails can be integrated into TEVYL programs at a larger scale considering the benefits it offers for increasing the quality in TEVYL. However, further research into integrating parent education into TEVYL is needed to analyze the process comprehensively and find more effective ways of strengthening teacher-parent partnerships.

REFERENCES

[1] Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. NCB UniversityPress, Vol. 9 No.5

[2] Donaldson, M. (1987). Children's MindsLondon: Routledge

[3] Tizard, B. & Hughes, M. (1984) Young Children Learning London: Fontana

[4] Wells, G. (1999) Dialogic Enquiry Cambridge: C.U.P.

[5] Winitz, H. (ed). (1981). The comprehension approach to foreign language instruction. Rowley, MA: Newbury House

[6] Linse C., van Vlack, S. & Bladas O. (2014). Parents and young learners in English language teaching: global practices and issues in school–home contacts. British Council ELT 14.04.

[7] Garton, S., Copland, F. and Burns, A. (2011). Investigating global practices in teaching English to young learners. British Council ELT 35.

[8] Enever, J., and Moon, J. (2009). 'New global contexts for teaching Primary ELT: Change and challenge', in Enever, J., Moon, J. and Raman, U. (eds) Young Learner English Language Policy and Implementation: International Perspectives. Reading: Garnet Education.