

Early EFL Education Is on the Rise in Oman: A Qualitative Inquiry of Parental Beliefs about Early EFL Learning

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Received: November 14, 2014 Accepted: December 16, 2014 Online Published: January 20, 2015

doi:10.5539/elt.v8n2p35 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n2p35>

Abstract

Today's parents are more interested in having their children acquire English language skills as early as possible because they see the demands of the globalizing world context and contemporary trends in society and wish to ensure that their children can live in a future (quite possibly) English-speaking society. These developments, particularly in the Gulf Region in general and in Oman in particular, have led the educational sector to accelerate efforts over the last decade to initiate hundreds of early childhood education programs that offer bilingual education systems. However, no research has been conducted in the Omani context on parents' beliefs about early instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL); claims regarding this issue remain speculative. This qualitative research study investigated parental beliefs about early EFL learning in Oman. Participants were 11 parents with children enrolled at a bilingual early childhood program. Interviews and a demographic survey were conducted. Findings revealed that parents are well aware of the benefits, challenges, and solutions of early EFL education. An exhaustive description of parents' beliefs about early EFL learning was extracted. Implications and recommendations for research, policy, and practice are offered.

Keywords: early EFL learning, bilingual children, early childhood education, parental beliefs, Oman

1. Introduction

In recent educational research and practice, the concept of family has taken on more complex meanings, especially in early childhood contexts. As the first educators of their children, parents are more enthusiastic about extending their role in their children's education due to the societal evolution of the last few decades. Parents are beginning to play new roles in their children's education and are more active partners with teachers and administrators in modern educational institutions. In turn, more parents believe this involvement should extend from curriculum development to decision-making (Tekin, 2011). Their overall goal is to ensure that their children have what they need for their internationalized future life and place in society. This transition in education-focused effective parenting is also reflected in the Omani context.

Oman is located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula with a population of 2,773,479 (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2010). The Omani government recognizes the importance of education—education costs total 24% of total government expenditures. This investment is viewed as a means to economic development and connection to the modern world. Yet despite these goals and investments, data show that funding is not having the desired effect in some regards. For example, the preschool enrollment rate (8.25%; UNICEF, 2008) has not been at the desired levels. Part of the reason for the low enrollment rate is that preschool is not part of the public education system—it is predominantly controlled by the private sector. For this and related reasons, several critical initiatives have been undertaken by the government to increase this enrollment rate. For instance, as a pilot application, kindergarten classes have been established in elementary school settings in recent years. Furthermore, the Omani government and society are well aware of the importance of the English language since it is widely used in almost every aspect of Omani life such as business, media, and education (Al-busaidi, 1995). In Oman, the English language has been central to the country's national development (Al-issa, 2006); a mandate to increase its use has received political, economic, and legislative support. Oman adopted English as the official foreign language and allocated significant budget and resources to its application in education (Al-issa & Al-bulushi, 2012).

In line with this trend, today's parents are more interested in having their children acquire English language

skills as early as possible because they see the demands of the globalizing world context and contemporary trends in society and are willing to ensure that their children are ready to be successful members of a future society in which speaking English is a necessity to social and economic survival. Owing to these developments, particularly in the Gulf Region in general and in Oman in particular, the educational sector has responded quickly in the last decade to meet this contemporary demand and initiated many early childhood education programs that offer bilingual education systems. Established as a model in 2007, the Child Care Center (CCC) at Sultan Qaboos University is an example of these bilingual early childhood programs. Principles and standards followed in CCC are from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and one of the major goals of this program is to have young children acquire two languages simultaneously. Parents are eager to enroll their children in the CCC's bilingual early childhood program. However, no research has been conducted in the Omani context on parents' beliefs about early EFL learning and whether claims regarding this issue extend beyond speculation. Hence, the research question of the present study was: What are the parental beliefs about early EFL learning in Omani context? Also, the current study is of great significance since the findings from this research on parental beliefs about early EFL education in the CCC context, including benefits, challenges, and solutions to those challenges, may have great practical and policy consequences. The implications for learning and practice are also discussed.

2. Review of Literature

Research shows (e.g., Nikolov, 2009) that early childhood is a significant period for language learning and development, even in a context with limited exposure to a second language such as EFL (Larson-Hall, 2008). As stated by Werker (2012), the fundamental process of language acquisition, including first words and first use of grammar, does not differ whether one or two or even more languages are being acquired. The process of learning a second language affects brain activity (Hidaka et al., 2012). Since young children have the advantage of plasticity in their procedural memory (Paradis & Kirova, 2014), which paves the way for picking up the attributes of the second language, it is easier for young children than adults to learn a second language (Nikolov, 2009).

Moreover, much research has demonstrated the benefits of early EFL acquisition on children's development, including academic, cognitive, and social domains. For example, Sun, Zhou, and Zhu (2013) showed that early EFL learners had better reading, writing, and spelling skills. Similarly, Marion, Shook, and Schroeder (2013) found that early EFL learning has a positive impact on children's math skills.

Furthermore, previous research on the effects of early EFL acquisition on the cognitive development domain has pointed to potential benefits for children. For example, early EFL learning has been found to have positive effects on children's metalinguistic competence (Lengyel, 2012) and awareness (Reder, Marec-Breton, Gombert, & Demont, 2013). Likewise, other benefits in the cognitive development domain have been suggested by empirical research—these include children's skills in focusing (Poulin-Dubois, Blaye, Coutya, & Bialystok, 2011), attention, control, working memory, abstract and symbolic representation skills (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Underleider, 2010), remembering (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009), planning (Paradis, Geneese, & Crago, 2011), ability to make decisions (Bialystok et al., 2009), problem-solving, attention processing speed, inverse processing efficiency, network of executive control for conflict resolution (Yang, Yang, & Lust, 2011), complexity and flexibility of brain activity (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000), and creativity (Leikin, 2013).

More to the point, early EFL education has been demonstrated to have a positive influence on young children's attitudes towards English (Cepik & Sarandi, 2014) and sociopragmatic awareness of English that involves request rather than reply strategies (Zhang & Yan, 2012). Early EFL acquisition's strong influence on an individual's social and communication skills has been well documented. For example, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) noted a positive impact on foreign language accent in favor of early EFL learners. Further benefits of early EFL learning that have been documented in the literature include the positive effects on identity development (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000), communication skills in a diverse society, and the ability to be free from biases and limited thinking (Keysar, Hayakawa, & An, 2011). There are also other potential benefits for their future, from school readiness to more job opportunities (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000). Because of its well-documented benefits, the idea of early EFL education has been supported by government bodies (Lacina, Levine, & Patience, 2010) and teachers (Habeeb, 2013).

Regarding the parents' beliefs about early EFL learning, there has been adequate research in different contexts (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Shannon & Millan, 2002; Shin & Kim, 1998). For example, Young and Tran (1999) conducted a study with Vietnamese participants and found that parents believed that bilingual education had

practical, career, and cognitive related advantages. Similarly, Oladejo (2010) investigated the parents' attitudes toward bilingual education in Taiwanese context. His study results showed that Taiwanese parents held strong positive attitudes towards early bilingual education. In another empirical research conducted by Gao and Park (2012), the focus group was Korean-Chinese parents. Their participants included 27 families and their findings showed that Korean-Chinese parents' had positive attitudes toward bilingualism and children's education. In Omani context, Tekin (2014) conducted a research to investigate the language performance of young children in a bilingual education program and found that the Omani young children had no problem in learning both languages simultaneously. However, to the author's knowledge, no research has specifically investigated the perspective of parents, especially in contexts in which Arabic is the first language, in general, and in the Omani context, in particular. Further, there has been a lack of adequate research on parental beliefs about challenges and solutions for early EFL acquisition. Hence, this study fills a gap in understanding of the early EFL phenomena by making information on parental perspectives and beliefs available to interested stakeholders. This study's overall goal was to investigate Omani parents' beliefs about early EFL learning by documenting their perspectives on early EFL learning benefits, challenges, and solutions.

3. Method

Qualitative methods of inquiry were used in the current study since qualitative methods such as interviewing participants were expected to be more informational and provide detailed descriptions of parents' beliefs about early EFL learning and their experiences with their own children.

3.1 Participants

The convenience-focused sampling method was used to obtain more concrete and solid data on the target group. Participants were parents with KG2 students enrolled at the Child Care Center (CCC) at Sultan Qaboos University; these children had been attending a bilingual education program for more than a year in the same educational institution so that these parents could offer more concrete and solid data. While 18 students were in KG2 at the CCC, only 11 (61%) responded to the research study—the rest 7 (39%) did not wish to participate.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were employed in this study: a demographic survey designed to gain better insight into participants' primary language, age, gender, education level, and employment status; and a "Parent Interview" tool which was used while interviewing parent participants. This tool targeted the three overarching domains of parents' beliefs about early EFL learning and consisted of three main questions: (1) What are the benefits of learning English for your child? (2) What are the challenges faced by your child in learning English? and (3) What are the possible solutions that you believe to overcome those challenges faced by your child in learning English?

3.3 Data Collection

The researcher contacted the CCC administration, discussed the scope of the study, and asked for CCC staff cooperation in reaching the parents of KG2 students prior to sending the parents the informed consent letter and time schedule for the study. After receiving parents' responses, participants were scheduled for and engaged in interviews and filled out the second study instrument. Eleven parents answered the interview questions. All interviews were conducted at the CCC. Triangulation procedures were used following the interviews to support validity issues as suggested by Merriam (2009). All interviews were conducted in Arabic. All data were kept in a secure password-protected computer.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the data collection, the researcher used descriptive statistics and qualitative methods to analyze the data gathered from parents. First, a descriptive analysis of participants' demographic characteristics was completed. Then, the interviews with parents were analyzed using qualitative techniques. Hence, the responses were initially categorized according to the major themes of the study which were the benefits, challenges, and solutions of early EFL education by employing thematic analysis method as explained by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012). Then, responses were transferred into one exhaustive answer in order to have a clear answer about beliefs and to be able to identify the most frequently mentioned statements and prioritize them as recommended by Moustakas (1994) and Cohen and Crabtree (2008).

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Looking first at demographic characteristics, participants' primary language, age, gender, educational level, and employment status were the factors of interest. All participants' primary language was Arabic. They ranged in age from 28 to 42 years (average = 36). Men and women were almost equally represented—six (55%) were females and the rest (45%) were males. With regard to education level, four (36%) had a doctorate, three (27%) had a master's, three (27%) had a bachelor's degree, and one had a diploma degree (9%). Finally, all parent participants were employed full-time. Table 1 provides demographic information on participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Variable		Frequency (Percentage)	Range
Primary Language	Arabic	11 (100%)	
Average Age	36		28-42
Gender	Females	6 (55%)	
	Males	5 (45%)	
Education Level	Doctorate	4 (36%)	
	Master	3 (27%)	
	Bachelor	3 (27%)	
	Diploma	1 (9%)	
Employment Status	Full-time	11 (100%)	

4.2 Benefits

Qualitative techniques were deployed to analyze the interview transcripts in this study. An in-depth and careful analysis indicated that parents' beliefs with respect to the benefits of learning English in the early years fell into four major themes. These themes are listed in the following tables in the order of their commonality among participants. This method was followed to detect themes and related challenges and solutions, as well. For example, the first theme was stressed more often by parents than the second theme during the interviews. Thus, Table 2 depicts parental beliefs about the benefits of early EFL learning.

Table 2. Parental beliefs about the benefits of learning EFL in early years

1. The child will be able to speak a universal language on which life depends and which is used by everyone and anywhere such as schools, hospitals, shops. At the time being, English is similar to a window through which the child can reach out the world. It also helps him with keeping up with the time as it is the language of current era which anyone should master it. It helps the child to communicate better with others from different nationalities in the school, society, and world like his friends, maid, neighbors, and others. He will also benefit from it when he starts to travel to other countries.
2. It will help the child with his future educational life, especially, at higher levels of education, and career, as well as his performance on learning other subjects because English has become a standard for medium language for "learning". The child will also benefit from it while gaining new skills, learning other subjects, dealing with modern equipments and applications, developing perceptual skills, improving self-confidence, and following the progress and developments in modern science.

4.3 Challenges

Second, although two parents reported no challenges, the majority believed that their children would face some major challenges in learning English as shown in the following table.

Table 3. Parental beliefs about the challenges of learning EFL in early years

1. Hardship with pronunciation and sounds of some letters specific to English.
2. Direction of the letters in writing.
3. Problems in gaining vocabulary.
4. Writing in English.
5. Adapting a new language in the beginning. The child's English learning is also challenged as there are lots of exceptional rules in the language and there is no time for practicing.

4.4 Solutions

The last domain was proposed solutions to challenges faced within the program. The following table contains information about possible solutions.

Table 4. Parental beliefs about possible solutions for overcoming challenges faced in early learning EFL

1. The technological means should be used to overcome the challenges of learning English such as CD.s, computer programs, TV programs such as educational ones, movies and cartoons, interactive games such as hear and see, and radio programs.
2. Practice is the key to learn English. The child should practice English both at school and home. Having mixed classes and activity groups from different nationalities might be a solution since they can learn also from their peers. Speaking in other languages should not be allowed in an EFL context.
3. Both the teachers and parents should focus on books and stories in English for sharing and reading together. More dramatic play and role play activities should be used effectively both at school and home. Home-school cooperation targeting the best interest of the child's English learning should be extended and strengthened.
4. Homework should be meaningful and effective.
5. The teachers should not violate the English they speak by mixing with another language and they should be better trained in teaching English to young children in a proper way.

Findings yielded important information in three overarching domains of parental beliefs on early EFL education. However, an exhaustive description of this phenomenon as suggested by Creswell (2012) is essential. This heuristic process of qualitative analysis also provides an opportunity to engage in creative synthesis of the phenomenon in order to understand the findings in a more systemic and organized way (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, an exhaustive description of parental beliefs about early EFL learning is provided in the following section.

4.5 An Exhaustive Description of Parental Beliefs about Early EFL Learning

Omani parents believe that the benefit of EFL learning in their child's early years is the ability to be able to reach out to the world, communicate with others in a globalized world in numerous life contexts, and keep up with the language of the current era. They also believe that early EFL learning will help their children's future education, particularly in higher education and other tertiary-level programs, since many of the subjects' medium of instruction and discourse are in English. Being able to communicate in English also will contribute to their future career. Participants believed that learning English at early ages will enable their children to gain new skills, learn other subjects, deal with modern equipment and applications, develop perceptual skills, improve self-confidence, and follow progress and developments in modern science. Moreover, parents pointed to several challenges faced by young children in learning English, including: hardship with pronunciation and the sounds of some letters specific to English (i.e., "ch"), direction of the letters in writing, adaptation to a new language at the beginning, exceptional rules specific to English language, and practicing the new language. However, parents believed that there were solutions to these major challenges. They prioritized the usage of technology, including CDs, computer programs, TV programs (educational ones), movies and cartoons, interactive games, and radio programs in dealing with these challenges. The next most highly recommended solution was reading and sharing books and stories with children both at school and home. They also emphasized practicing English both at school and home by promoting engagement in mixed nationality classes and activity groups that would allow young children to speak in English more. They also believed in the importance of dramatic play to improve this EFL learning journey and strongly stressed the importance of home-school cooperation in this regard. More to the

point, some parents believed that homework about this subject should be meaningful and effective. Lastly, parents mentioned the importance of teacher training in so far as teachers should not violate the English they speak by mixing it with another language and they should be better trained in the proper teaching of English to young children.

5. Discussion

The findings from the present study yielded important information for all stakeholders (e.g., academics, teachers and other practitioners, parents, and children). However, this study was limited to the CCC at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman and so findings may not be generalizable. Nevertheless, several headlights should be pointed out to those interested in transferring findings to their own contexts. For example, it was found that parents are quite knowledgeable and interested in their young children's EFL learning. They emphasized many important elements of the subject matter and proposed solutions to the rising problems. The findings also indicated that parents prioritize some elements over others in their belief system on the matter. For instance, they are very much aware of the universality and necessity of the English language and believe that early, effective EFL acquisition will help their children throughout their life in almost all contexts, from higher learning to career. These findings were similar to the results of previous studies (Gao & Park, 2012; Oladejo, 2010; Young & Tran, 1999). Also, parents are not committed to older traditional methods of teaching and learning another language but strongly enthusiastic about the role of technology in English learning. Although they believe pronunciation and other specific problems such as direction of writing in English may be problems, they are also aware that these problems can be solved gradually over time and through collaborations between schools and homes—a signal to all education professionals that Omani parents are willing and ready to work with the school to gain the best opportunities and utmost improvement in their young child's EFL learning journey. These findings are in line with Tekin's (2011) study regarding the parents' motivational beliefs to be involved in their young children's learning. There are also several implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

5.1 Implications and Recommendations

Beyond the parental belief that their children will benefit from early EFL learning, several important implications may be drawn from study findings. First, as supported by the claims of Tekin (2014), teacher training cannot occur outside of higher education institutions because teaching English as a foreign language in early years to young children requires great knowledge, responsibility and capacity. In the case of Oman, those who teach in preschool educational settings do not need a bachelor degree. This lack of an important credential may adversely affect young children's earliest and most important foreign language acquisition experience by receiving knowledge and skills mainly from unqualified nonprofessionals. It should be noted that emerging experience also has a great impact on later learning since the foundations of new language learning should be based on a solid foundation. Hence, the majority of teachers, even native English speakers, should receive comprehensive and current training in the higher educational system in Oman.

Second, the challenges and solutions offered by parents point to major issues that should be receive priority, such as the usage of technology—specifically interactive games and TV programs in EFL learning. Almost all these elements and/or domains are included in the Early Childhood Education Department Programs at SQU. However, it is critical to note that the field should not be solely served by graduates of this department. For instance, graphic design, and computer technology programs should also be engaged in educational software programs developed for use in young children's education. Thus higher education institutions should provide and make it easier to receive electives courses within these programs. More to the point, the Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Education should mandate the implementation of up-to-date technological programs in early childhood institutions offering instruction on the early acquisition of EFL.

Third, higher education institutions and practicing teachers should collaborate with parents. This study's findings indicated that Omani parents are well aware of the importance of the connection between school and home. These findings are in line with the claims of previous research studies (e.g., Paradis & Kirova, 2014). Therefore, higher-level programs, and specifically the teacher education programs, should place more emphasis on parental involvement, including their contribution to decision-making processes. It is becoming more and more important to do so since the majority of today's parents are ready and willing to participate in their young children's education in general, and in their EFL learning experience in particular. On the other hand, early childhood training institutions should be encouraged to develop parent involvement programs that train parents to contribute to their child's EFL acquisition.

Although this research yielded significant findings, it was limited in terms of number of participants, ages of students, and context. Therefore, future research should be conducted on parental beliefs about young children's

EFL learning in bilingual programs at different grade levels, in different contexts such as private schools, and with more participants in order to gain a more holistic picture of the phenomenon. In this study, since the CCC is located on the SQU campus, participating parents were highly educated. Therefore, more research should be done with parents from diverse educational and employment backgrounds. In addition, teachers and parents should be trained and encouraged to promote and improve the English language proficiencies of young children. Administrators should work on creating training sessions for both teachers and parents. In addition, technology usage, practice, and home-school collaborations should be developed and current uses should be assessed for possible improvements. Policy makers and related stakeholders in Oman could use the CCC's bilingual education program as a model for other schools. Lastly, higher education programs should identify improvements needed to produce better, up-to-date, knowledgeable, and sophisticated teachers and educators who can better fulfill the needs of children and the community.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, parents whose children are enrolled at the CCC and are receiving bilingual education programs in their early years believed that learning English in the early years is important, necessary in today's world and holds numerous benefits for their children. They also identified some major problems that could be solved by working together with professionals and other stakeholders. Thus, other stakeholders should be aware of and benefit from these findings as they work to improve young children's EFL learning.

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