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Parental Involvement and Reading-Related Activities of Struggling Readers of English as a Second Language

Abstract

The focus of the study is to explore the way the parents took part in their children's English as a second language (henceforth ESL) learning at home. This qualitative study utilised interviews to garner information from seven participating parents of struggling readers of English as a second language in a Malaysian primary classroom. This paper intends to report the findings from the research question, namely: "How do the participating parents work with their children at home?" Two major themes emerged from the data: involvement; and challenges. In this paper, the partial results of one of the main themes discovered, that is involvement will be presented. This paper highlights reading-related activities that were carried out by the parents at home with their children. It is hoped from this study that educators could exploit the home reading activities of the struggling readers to inform teaching practices to effectively support those students in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: ESL Classroom, ESL Students, Low-attaining Students, Struggling Readers, Home Reading Activities, Parental Involvement, Malaysian Primary Classroom.

Introduction

Reading is perceived "as a dynamic process that involves complex social relationships with members of their particular sociocultural contexts such as teachers and parents" (Li, 2004). According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) as soon as reading in a foreign language starts to be taught, reading skills can be developed. Children's education starts at home. Parents are children's primary teachers and are significant to their children's learning (Parliindungan, 2017) and early literacy development (Lee, 2010; Reglin, Cameron & Losike-Sedimo, 2012). While parental roles in

supporting children's education has been the focus of much research interest, very little is known about it in the ESL literacy learning context in Asia (e.g. Lee, 2010; Li, 2004) let alone in Malaysia (e.g. Majid, Muhammad & Puteh, 2005).

Therefore, there is a need to fill the gap of previous studies by privileging the narrative of under-researched parents of ESL students dealing with their children's learning at home in order to comprehend the resources and feelings of those parents of students who struggle with reading in English as their second language. Cheng, Yunus and Mohammad (2016), in their study on factors that contribute to low performance of ESL primary school students in

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Malaysia, argue that parents and teachers need to work hand-in-hand in facilitating the children to progress in their learning. Predominantly, this paper aims to explain the ways in which parents assist their seven-year old children at home. The research question formulated for this study is: How do the participating parents work with their children at home?

Literature Review

A review of the extant literature discovered a number of ways in which parental participation in children's learning is examined and discussed. The way parents work with their children which can be simply termed as 'parental involvement' has been examined and discussed as a single domain (Fan & Chen, 2001) or as multiple constructs with numerous meanings, defined differently by different researchers (Bullock, 2014; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007; Tekin, 2011). The multiplicity of constructs regarding parental participation means that there is no consensus among scholars as to how to engage theoretically with parents' involvement in their children's ESL literacy learning. Approaches, however, can include elements which are linked to parents' engagement in home reading "practices", (e.g. Forey, Besser & Sampson, 2015; Li, 2004; Pendleton, 2017; Wati, 2015), which are sometimes denoted as "activities", "experiences" and "strategies" (Shi, 2013). Besides that, studies on home literacy practices in which the engagement of parents and children in particular literacy activities are explored have often adopted an ethnographic approach (e.g. Reyes, Alexandra & Azuara, 2007; Azuara & Azuara & Reyes, 2011; Rodriguez, 2005). A combination of instruments, namely participant observations, informal interviews, field notes and collection of artefacts are utilised in those studies to obtain an in-depth understanding of the children's literacy experiences in the participants' homes. Those investigations include determining the existence of literacy materials at home, how those materials are utilised, and how children are involved directly and indirectly with the literacy activities, either alone or with their custodian. Most ethnographic studies, however, require extensive time or "long-term study of a social or cultural group" (Green & Bloome, 1997) which is not always practical for all research projects. This study fills in the gap of previous research by using interviews as the main research instrument to obtain information from the parents as recommended by Pendleton (2017).

For example, in a study by Reyes et al. (2007), the literacy and language experiences of two children and their principal caregivers at home and their immigrant families in Arizona. The study utilised ethnographic tools such as

observations, field notes, informal interviews and the collection of examples of the children's written work. These revealed several methods that the parents employed to support their children to develop both Spanish and English, which the parents deemed to be vital for educational purposes and better job opportunities. In their article, the researchers reported about two families' home literacy experiences. It was discovered that both families had many writing resources used for children's learning such as paper, crayons, notebooks, colouring books, markers and pencils. Apart from that, computers and games were also used to facilitate children's literacy education. The authors determined ten domains to summarise the literacy practices that children partook in with their main custodian, and the ways support was provided for their children's bilingual needs. I include four of these that I considered relevant to my study:

1. School-related activity: The activity in this domain is related to the child's schooling. For instance, doing homework given by the teacher;
2. Entertainment: The activity in this domain is related to choosing or finding out about interesting activities or related to assisting or maintaining the child's involvement in the enjoyable activities; for instance reading novels, reading TV guides and subtitles or printed signs from cartoon shows
3. Storybook time: The activity in this domain is related to someone in the family reading the story to the child at any time of the day;
4. Literacy for the Sake of Teaching/Learning Literacy: The activity in this domain is related to the child who reads or writes, or the child who tries to read or write "for the sake of learning about reading or writing" and the activity can be done with someone in the family for example a child writing his own name.

The authors suggest that their findings can inform educators about how the family literacy activities and resources found at home can be utilised as an input to "better serve the needs of a linguistically and culturally diverse student population" (Reyes et al., 2007). Reyes et al.'s (2007) study is quite comprehensive and details many instances illustrating the fundamental purposes of children's and parents' biliteracy activities since the research is largely based on observations in the home. In my opinion, however, different results may be obtained if other research instruments, such as in-depth interviews, were to be utilised to discover the type(s) of support that parents offered to help

their children's literacy growth (Pendleton, 2017). Additionally, the purpose of Reyes et al.'s study was to examine the presence of all literacy practices at home that facilitate children's bilingual development, a similar study might yield different results if it focused more narrowly on English-related literacy activities alone.

Theoretical Framework

Learning is ultimately a social phenomenon that occurs within the environment that students belong to through communication with people or objects (Kim, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978) and "the opportunities that learners have, impacts on how literacy is achieved" (Pillay, 2018). According to social constructivist theory, "knowledge is a social product, and learning is a social process" (Pritchard & Woolard, 2010). Street (1995) further asserted that engaging with literacy is a social act right from the onset; in essence, "the development of literacy is shaped by the structure and organisation of the social situations in which that literacy is practised" (Blackledge, 2001).

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study incorporating seven parents of struggling readers who studied in Year One in a primary school in Malaysia. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling method. Informed consent were sought before the study began. The participants received explanation about the research purposes and their rights to withdraw at any point of time without having to inform the researcher. This study adopted interviews containing a highly-structured interview component, an unstructured interview component and a more substantial, semi-structured component. A highly-structured interview format was employed at the beginning of the interview session with the parent. This approach was utilised to break the ice and make the participants feel at ease as the questions revolved around the participants' demographic information. Based on their responses I also engaged in small talk to let the participants feel more comfortable to open up with me. In the semi-structured part of the interview I followed the recommendation of Robson (2011) to utilise probes. Probes are helpful to facilitate the participants to expand on their answers when I judged that they appeared to have more to talk about. Examples of probes that I employed in this study were "What is your own personal view on this?" and "Anything more?" (Robson, 2011). During the interview sessions, a digital recorder was utilised to record the participants' responses after informed consent was granted. The

interviews lasted between forty and fifty minutes and took place at various settings requested by the parents, such as at their house, their work place, mosque and their children's school. The initial structured part highlighted the participants' demographic data such as their age, place of birth, marital status, number of children, educational attainment and history of employment. In the semi-structured part I posed questions related to the way parents got involved with their children's learning. The interviews were carried out in Malay, the national language or the home language of the participants. A recording device was used to record the participants' responses after informed consent was sought.

Data Analysis

The interview recording was transferred onto laptop from the recording device. I listened to the recordings repeatedly and closely as recommended by Silverman (2011) to become familiarised with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I transcribed the data by using an unfocused transcription technique to highlight the deliberate meaning of the data as I did not intend to examine the voice intonation or nonverbal interactions of the research participants (Gibson & Brown, 2009). According to McMillan & Schumacher (2006) qualitative data analysis principally involves an inductive approach, in which the data is sorted out into categories and patterns discovered among the categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967). Data obtained in this study were analysed to find emergent themes. In order to identify themes, I read my entire data line-by-line a few times so as to become familiar with the material. Next, I began the coding process. Coding can be defined as labelling data that seems to be interesting to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I arrange the codes into categories and described my preliminary understandings in different Word documents. After that, I looked at the connections between categories and finally put the categories into themes. Two themes emerged namely, involvement and challenges. This paper highlights the theme, involvement and particularly discusses home reading-related activities of the

Findings

From the analysis, I discovered a number of domains that are predominantly employed by parents: school related activity; entertainment; literacy for the sake of teaching/learning literacy; and storybook time. In this section I will provide examples of each domain that is related to how

the parents participating in this study worked with their children at home.

School Related Activity

All six parents reported that they strongly depended on homework as one way to help their children with ESL reading. They also unanimously agreed that homework was rarely available. For example:

Mrs. Ela stated *"We will help Ali when the homework is available. It is good for him because he can do some readings and revision of what he did at school."*

Mrs. Amina also mentioned that, she will sit with him and help him to read his homework, especially when he asked her to help.

Mrs. Sofia believed that homework is vital for her child too. Mrs. Sofia felt that homework is an important way to help Qila with her English reading ability since Mrs. Sofia has not got any idea how to facilitate her daughter's learning in other ways. Mrs. Sofia, however, noticed that the English homework was often not made available. Apart from that, one parent also utilised past exam papers to help her child in learning. For example:

Mrs. Nina considered previous English exam papers to be useful learning resources and therefore retained them for future use. She said, *"I keep test papers that Imran sat earlier this year. I think it is a good guide to help him during revision and it might come in handy."* Mrs. Nina described how she made use of previous exam papers as a resource for reading practice. She reported that Imran sometimes read the paper by himself. However, if he encountered difficult or long words, he would usually skip the words. Imran also repeatedly asked Mrs. Nina about the pronunciation of certain words that he found in the paper, as Mrs. Nina reported, *"Imran asks me how to pronounce certain words such as 'we'. And I ask him back"* Mrs. Nina also redirected the questions to her son to make sure he could remember the meaning and pronunciation of the words that he had previously asked about.

Entertainment

Mrs. Su, one of the parents, claimed that her child was fond of songs and was exposed to the songs that her sister listened to. According to Mrs. Su, even though her child could hardly read, her sister facilitated her to read some of the lyrics displayed on the laptop. As the songs were repeatedly played, Tairah could memorise the lyrics easily and she loved to hum the songs at home. One of the songs that she loves was 'Let-it-go', a well-known song from the famous Disneyland film, Frozen.

The study also involves a family member of the struggling readers, named Ira. This was purposely requested by Ira's mother Mrs. Mina. In order to facilitate her brother's learning in ESL reading, Ira employed cartoon shows to help her brother with ESL reading. Cartoons such as Upin Ipin were accessible on YouTube. Rino's sister said, *"I used Upin Ipin because it has an English subtitles and Rino loves the cartoon so much since he was very young. I think that is because of the characters are about his age."* Ira made use of the English subtitles to introduce Rino to some English words, and selected a few simple words and translated them into Malay.

Literacy for the Sake of Teaching/Learning

Mrs. Ela reported that her husband helped by chanting alphabetical letters with his son before his son went to bed. They utilised books written in Malay. According to Mrs. Ela, although the activity was simple, he hoped that his son would obtain something from it. She narrated how the activity was done. Her husband would first chant A, B, C and count 1, 2, 3. Then, he would ask his son to repeat back those letters and numbers.

Mrs Amina, another parent, saw her son scribbling letters on a piece of paper and reading it. In the interview Mrs Amina said, *"Sometimes I found my son occupied with alphabet writing after he comes home from school. He writes the letters down and he reads them with a voice that I can hardly hear and then he comes to me to read it out."*

Mrs. Nina, one of the parents, utilised pizza boxes to encourage her son to read English words. Since pizza is Imran's favourite food, Mrs. Nina took the opportunity to facilitate Imran's learning by using the food packaging. Imran's mother stated, *"I use a pizza box to help my child with reading"*. She also stated, *"He loves pepperoni pizza, we can have a personal pizza with only RM5 from a nearby pizza restaurant."* Mrs. Nina mentioned that she usually asked Imran to spell out the word 'pizza' on the box as a reinforcement to increase his interest in learning. She also mentioned that it is good to make use of everything that can be found in the immediate surroundings to help her child.

Story Time

One family member named Ira, employed 'The Peter and Jane; book series as one of the English reading activities. According to Ira, the story books were borrowed from her workplace to help her brother with reading. Ira's own familiarity with the books encouraged her to use them with her brother at home. She also aimed to guide her brother to read the story through

phonics. Ira stated that the story books have sentences that describe the pictures and some of the words are repeated a few times throughout the story. Ira would read the story to her brother. Besides that, she also read the sentences and her brother would repeat after her.

Discussion

To fit the findings into the framework designed by Reyes et al. (2007), I found that the four domains proposed by the authors as home literacy practices can be used as guidelines to understand the parents' positioning towards reading activities that they had with their children. Firstly, it was discovered that school-related activity was perceived as the most prominent activity done by the parents to assist their children in ESL reading. Under this domain, activities included doing homework by all parents, using past exam papers and the use of the school-book named 'Supermind' by one parent to facilitate their children in ESL reading. Furthermore, two parents also used chanting ABC to assist their children in ESL reading which falls under the category literacy for the sake of literacy. In addition to that, one participating parent in this study utilised songs and another used cartoons, which belonged to the entertainment domain. Another activity that could belong to the entertainment domain was the use of a picture dictionary by two participating parents. Another parent also used storybooks to facilitate the child which falls under the category storybook time. Another activity used by one parent which did not belong to any of the categories suggested by Reyes et al. (2007) was the use of a pizza box. In this study, a pizza box was used by the parent to teach children to spell and read the words related to pizza such as pizza, beef and pepperoni. The use of this framework implies that the parents in this study mostly used activities from the school-related activity domain. This discovery also suggests that the parents of young children in this study are wedded to school-associated reading activities, which echoes a previous study in the Malaysian context by Boivin, AlBakri, Yunus, Mohammed & Muniandy (2014).

Conclusion

This paper briefly reports the findings on parental involvement in children's ESL reading at home to identify particular home related-reading activities employed by the parents to facilitate foster their children's ESL reading development. By referring to Reyes et al.'s (2007) 'domains of activity' related to literacy framework, the study discovered a number of domains applicable to

the way the parents work with their children in this study: School related activity; Entertainment; Literacy for the Sake of Teaching/Learning; and Story Time. Studies on the home literacy practices of ESL students are exceptionally under-researched (e.g. Musa, Lie & Azman, 2012), let alone the struggling readers. Thus, more studies should be carried out as it provides "a field ripe for exploration" (Reyes et al., 2007) to inform a more incorporated curriculum and meaningful learning activities that acknowledge the role students' home reading practices play to effectively support ESL struggling readers' in the Malaysian context. This is in line with Vygotsky (1978) who proposed that literacy growth is influenced by students' sociocultural context. The students have specific familial circumstances and also had particular materials that may never have been thought about by the teacher. Such a diversity requires the teacher and school to understand the struggling readers' backgrounds and personalities so that the needs of these students will be identified.

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