

Current situation and countermeasures of early childhood family parent-child reading and English Education in China

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Abstract

Preschool period is critical for children's language development and character formation. However, around 70% of parents in China do not realize the importance of early reading, 55% do not know how to cultivate children's reading interest, 40% do not read with their children, and 90% cannot help their children in learning English. Therefore, the present study proposes countermeasures: (1) promote the significance of early childhood reading and preschool bilingual study; (2) offer an economical, effective and feasible teaching material and method; (3) recommend setting up children's centers for enjoyable reading and teaching English voluntarily; (4) suggest government increasing the fund for preschool education and offering bilingual education in kindergarten.

Keywords: preschoolers in China; family parent-child reading; English education; current situation; countermeasures

Introduction

Preschool period is critical to develop children's linguistic competence, cultivate the interest, habits and competence of reading. Early reading is the main form and an effective method of early language education. It can enhance children's linguistic cognition and development and cultivate reading habits, reading comprehension and expression competence (Zhou, 2015) [28].

Developing early reading ability has received attention from many countries. The U.S the U.K. and Canada have taken early reading as an important subject in early education through Reading First Program (Gonzalez *et al.* 2011).

English has become the international and global language (Song, 2011). Only with good English, can the career development have a broad global space (Yang, 2006). Due to the effect of critical period (Lenneberg, 1967) [28] children have a strong imitative competence and physical and psychological advantages on acquiring foreign language naturally. They can learn English well easily in an English environment with suitable teaching materials and methods (Hu, 2013; Yuan, 2012) [04]. In addition, many scholars believe the English study will not influence preschoolers' development of Chinese (Huang, 2011) [5].

Family is the cradle of life and the first place for children to be educated. Parents are the first teachers of children; early childhood parent-child reading is the core content of early childhood education, an important route to cultivate children's linguistic competence, an accelerator for children's mental and physical development, a window on the world for children, and a solid foundation for their future study (Nie, 2013) [13].

The most important period of life is not the university stage, but the first few years after birth, the period from 0 to 6 years old; childhood is the most important period for character formation, and this period needs the help of intelligence most (Montessori, 2011) [11]. "Failing students are not left behind at 16 but at six" (Dryden & Vos, 2001, p.236) [2].

Therefore, it is very important to investigate the current situation of preschoolers' family parent-child reading and English education, analyze the existing problems and propose

countermeasures for millions of preschoolers in China and their parents.

1. Situation of family parent-child reading in China

According to a questionnaire survey of 173 families in 2013, around 70% of parents in China do not realize the importance of early reading, think reading is a task for elementary school students and it is too early for preschoolers to read; 83% of parents simply regard reading as word study and believe only after studying words can children read (Song, 2013) [17].

Most young parents in China also do not realize the importance of daily parent-child reading and do not perform this activity actively, they know little about ways to choose picture books and methods of parent-child reading and suffer from the lack of relevant strategies for facilitating early reading (Xi, 2014). Even in big cities, where culture and education are relatively developed, only 20% of families often read books with children (Tao, 2013) [20].

According to the survey results in *2015 Report of Family Parent-Child Reading*, published by Dangdang Children's Books and Answer Consultant Agency in March 2015, though over 90% of Chinese parents stated they attend to children's reading, they did not act, over 40% do not read with children, over 20% do not know how to choose books for children, and around 55% of parents do not know how to increase their children's interest in reading. Parents are models of children and children are mirrors of their parents, if parents do not like reading, how can they cultivate their children's interest in reading? Many parents complained that they bought many books to their children, but their children even did not browse through them. The reason is many parents require their children to read books while using and viewing mobile phones and TVs (Cai, 2015) [1].

Parents are the first teachers of children, and co-reading between parents and children can enhance their relationship and cultivate good reading habits for a child. However, many parents are insufficient in the awareness of reading, instruction method, and social support (Tao, 2013) [20].

Nowadays, more and more highly educated parents in China's cities will spend 30-60 minutes reading with children or lying in bed and reading aloud stories to their children until their children sleep. This parent-child reading and story has been supported and encouraged by more scholars (Qi, 2014).

However, millions of preschoolers of less-educated families in rural areas and cities, especially left-behind preschoolers, cannot experience the pleasure of parent-child reading, because their parents are not aware of developing early reading or cannot accompany them (parents must work in the cities) (Wu, 2012).

Many families in China, especially most rural families, do not realize the importance of early reading, reading environment and materials, and forming children's reading habit (Yang, 2013) [24]. For children in these families, television becomes their only partner. Staying with TV for a long time will negatively influence children's development of attention, language, reading ability, and their executive ability, sleep, weight, and blood pressure (Liu & Zhang, 2012) [9].

More scholars realized reading is the basis of study, and early reading is important to the development of preschool children, which can foster reading interest and habit (Zhou, 2015) [28]. The condition, environment, and ability of language and reading in early childhood are closely related to children's reading ability and academic achievement (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998) [16].

2. Situation of family English education in China

Since kindergarten teachers' salary is usually lower than the average salary, most kindergarten cannot afford to hire the highly-qualified teachers and offer high-level interest-oriented classes in English, which makes the education departments hard to regulate and manage. Therefore, China's Ministry of Education issued *The Notice Regulates the Education and Child Care in Kindergartens to Prevent and Corrects the Primary School Style Education* (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Most primary schools in China start English lesson from third grade, preschoolers can only learn English in English classes outside kindergarten, which costs expensively, because over 90% of parents do not have the competence to guide their children in learning English (Liang, 2013) [8].

These training classes usually have 10-20 students each class, employ traditional face-to-face teaching methods, one to two times a week and last one to two hours once. Though teachers adopt the TPR teaching methods, and the classroom climate is positive, the age of children (four to eight years old) and long lessons (lasts 70-80 minutes with only a ten-minute break) make it difficult for the preschoolers to keep attention in the latter part. Each lesson needs ¥80-200, based on whether the teacher is a local Chinese teacher or a foreign teacher, and the tuition for a year costs about ten thousand yuan (Shuo, 2012).

The ideal foreign language learning methods for preschooler is to learn many times a day, but do not last over 15 minutes each time, and integrate foreign language learning into the daily life and playing, helping them study easily and love to study. However, parents may take several 15 minute sets to send children to training institutions, so it is impossible for those training institutions to teach 15 minutes. Actually, Chinese parents spend high training expenses, but their children's English is not improved significantly (Yin, 2013) [26].

Even so, many urban white-collar families in China send their children to these English training classes. But more low-income families in China cannot afford this expensive tuition, so most preschoolers in China do not have chance to get family English education (Kong, 2013).

As for the families in the countryside, most young parents must leave their hometown to coastal cities to find jobs, but they are forced to leave their children to their parents because of their long work time, low income, and the restriction of household registration, meaning their children cannot go to inexpensive urban public kindergartens and free public primary and middle schools. There are 61 million left-behind children in China's countryside, which accounts for 37.7% of total countryside children and 21.88% of total children in China. The average age of grandparents taking care of these left-behind children is 59.2, and most only have attended primary school. Their education level is low, and 8% of grandfathers and 25% of grandmothers have never attended school. The restrictions on education level leave many difficulties and challenges for grandparents, when they raising and educating their grandchildren (Research Team of All-China Women's Federation, 2013) [14]. The educational gap between cities and countryside in China is huge. Many remote villages do not have kindergarten, library, computer, and TV, and many grandparents are illiterate, so it is impossible for preschool children to receive preschool education. Many children cannot get the appropriate education and must take several hours per day to cross over mountains to attend school (Wu, 2015) [21]. The minority nationality regions in the remote and impoverished areas of the country often experience a shortage or lack of both human and material resources. Because of this, many primary schools cannot offer English lesson. They are not put on equal footing with their majority counterparts (Sunuodula & Feng, 2011) [19]. The preschool English education is even a dream.

3. Countermeasures and suggestions

3.1 Promoting the significance of early childhood family parent-child reading and English study, letting more parents realize that preschool period is important for developing children's interest in reading Chinese and English, and make clear and value their roles in early childhood education of their children.

Stevens (1968, p. 73) also pointed out "the most harmful misunderstanding in the history of education is to conduct various types of reading education only after six years old. If the significance of mastering language is neglected, we will lose the understanding of human growth and development from a basic side. If we just take preschool education as a developing period of body and emotion, then how do we interpret the mystery of language?" "Each baby is born a genius, but the traditional educational views usually wear away their natural talent in their first six years" (Dryden & Vos, 2001, p.231) [2] their reading habits and skills are not developed through early reading in the early childhood.

Many scholars in China endorse children in early childhood should start to learn English, because children have a strong imitative competence and physical and psychological advantages on acquiring foreign language naturally. They can learn English well easily in an English environment with suitable teaching materials and methods (Hu, 2013; Yuan, 2012) [4, 27]. In addition, many scholars believe English study

will not influence preschoolers' development of Chinese (Huang, 2011) ^[5].

Only in this way, can more children read books in the mode of parent-child reading and get elementary education of English.

3.2 Educationalists need to work on teaching materials and methods that can develop children's bilingual competence economically and effectively, such as ESBR methods (Feng, 2015), which indicates that parents should spend 30 minutes per day reading books with their children in interactive role-play performance. Children's reading interest and habits can be cultivated and their reading comprehension competence and expression ability in Chinese and English in this way after a few months or weeks. The study materials only cost a few hundred yuan, which is very economical and can be accepted by low-income families in China, even the parents who are not fluent in English can make children good at English.

3.3 Because the number of public libraries in China and children's books in them is limited, I suggest people donating picture books and raising fund to establish parent-child reading playground in urban and rural communities to let parents and children read more books, and also propose the retired teachers and college students teaching English voluntarily to help the disadvantaged children to improve their bilingual competence and school readiness.

3.4 Governments are suggested increasing the fund of preschool education, establishing more qualified kindergartens, attracting more qualified teachers by high salary to enable more children to have bilingual education.

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