

A Study on the Influence of Family Factors on Preschool Children's English Learning in Dalian, China

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Abstract—The present study assessed the English proficiency of preschool children aged 4-6 in Dalian, China. A quantitative study method complemented with a qualitative interview was adopted to examine the relationship between parental factors (parents' SES, parents' behavior and parents' attitudes) and children's English proficiency. The scores of PLS-4 prove that children's English proficiency from urban regions are significantly higher than the children from suburban regions. Parental factors and English proficiency correlations indicate the parents' SES, parents' behaviors and parents' attitudes are associated with children's English proficiency. The higher the parents' educational level and family income, the higher the children's English proficiency is. However, the marital status has no significant relationship with children's English proficiency. The parents' beliefs in children's abilities and expectations have no significant relationship with children's English proficiency either, which is out of expectation.

Keywords—English proficiency; Preschool Children; Parental Factors; Socioeconomic Status (SES)

I. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English language at younger ages in schools around China has been a feature under the trend of economic globalization and the rapid development of domestic economy. The average English learning starting age in Dalian, the largest coastal city in north China, is being pushed younger and younger. Almost all urban primary schools in Dalian are required to teach English from grade one. Many kids at very young age study English at a variety of commercial English learning institutions and they can understand simple English and express it. However, in families with relatively low incomes, where parents devote much less to children's English learning, children can only greet or master a few very common words in English. This gap of English proficiency between children from families of different regions has aroused author's deep concern.

It is not new that the quality of education is closely related to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students' families. Children of low socioeconomic status often have lower abilities than children of higher socioeconomic status [1]. A series of early language learning studies conducted in seven European countries in 2013 found that parents' educational level has a

significant impact on young learners' target language proficiency. Various aspects of poverty such as limited access to services and low levels of parental education are associated with low language skills of children [2]. Young [3] identified parents exert a positive attitudinal influence on their children's FL learning by encouraging participation in FL exchange programs. Zou Weicheng stated that family economic status, parents' social rights and parents' educational level have significant effects on students' English learning achievement, confidence and interest [4].

Butler's study of a medium-sized city in mainland China implicated that children from families with different economic and social status show significant differences in oral proficiency from the fourth grade of primary school [5].

It can be seen that the imbalance of foreign language learning achievements caused by different SES has attracted the attention of scholars. The following study was conducted to find out if there is a gap in English proficiency of preschool children due to different SES in Dalian.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The research questions are listed as follows: (1) What is the English proficiency of preschool children aged 4-6 in Dalian? Is the English proficiency of children's from suburban regions significantly different from the children from urban regions? (2) What is the relationship between the English proficiency of preschool children aged 4-6 in Dalian and their parents' socio-economic status, parents' behavior and parents' attitudes?

The study has adopted a quantitative method complimented by qualitative interviews with parents. 10 kindergartens in urban and suburban regions of Dalian were selected, of which 200 preschool children aged 4-6 years were randomly drawn by stratified sampling method. If a parental consent form was received, the child would be included in the study. 182 preschool children and 78 parents were involved in the study eventually, with 18 children and 9 parents dropped out due to various reasons. The English proficiency of these children were assessed with the Children's Language Scale (PLS-4).

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III. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The PLS-4 is a standardized test for language, which is examined in two aspects: expressive and receptive. Expressive

ability means the ability to speak the target language, and receptive ability refers to how much students can understand the target language. The English proficiency scores were listed in Table I.

TABLE I. ENGLISH PROFICIENCY SCORES OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN BY PLS-4

Regions in Dalian	Samples	Average Scores	SD
Urban	98	8.87	1.987
Suburban	84	4.43	2.626
Total	182	6.65	2.060

It can be seen from Table 1 that the English proficiency scores of preschool children aged 4-6 in different areas of Dalian are 8.87 and 4.43 respectively. Inter-group ANOVA analysis indicated that there was significant difference of these two groups.

Parent survey, which was based on Wigfield's research framework, was designed to gather information about the parents' social status, parents' behavior and parents' attitudes. The survey questions included parents' education, family income, marital status, the number of children in the family, parents' general beliefs in children's abilities and their expectations, parents' behaviors such as the time spent with their children, teaching strategies, and the encouragement to participate in various activities.

Based on the scores of PLS-4 and the results of the parents' questionnaire, the differences of preschool children under the influence of different parents' factors were analyzed. SPSS. 17.0 (social science statistical software package) was used for statistical analyses. The Pearson r was used to find correlations between English proficiency of children and the data from parent survey. Correlations would find out what kind of parental factors affect the language scores on the PLS-4. All significance levels were measured at .001 using a two-tailed test.

TABLE II. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN'S ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND SURVEY ITEMS

	r	p
Parents' Education	.45	< .001
Family Income	.37	< .001
Marital Status	.18	.023
Parents' Beliefs	.34	.002
Parents' Behaviors	.56	.001

The Pearson r was computed between parent's education and children's English proficiency. The correlation was statistically significant, $r(78) = .45$, $p < .001$. The Pearson r was computed between family income and children's English proficiency. The correlation was significant, $r(78) = .37$, $p < .001$. The correlation between marital status and children's English proficiency was not statistically significant, with $r(78) = .18$, $p = .023$. The Pearson r between parents' beliefs and children's English level was not statistically significant, with $r(78) = .34$, $p = .002$. The Pearson r was computed between

parents' behaviors and English proficiency. The correlation was statistically significant, with $r(78) = .56$, $p = .001$.

The scores of PLS-4 prove that children's English proficiency from urban regions is significantly different from the children from suburban regions. Parental factors and English proficiency correlations indicate the parents' SES, parents' behaviors and parents' attitudes are associated with children's English proficiency. The higher the parents' educational level and family income, the higher the children's English proficiency is. The more the positive behaviors of the parents, the higher the children's English proficiency is. However, the marital status has no significant relationship with children's English proficiency. The parents' beliefs in children's abilities and expectations have no significant relationship with children's English proficiency either, which is out of expectation. That is say, even if parents have great expectations in children's abilities, if they don't do anything good to children with their English development, the result will not be promising.

Interviews with parents suggest that the children with high English proficiency can get access to more English resources, such as an English speaking environment, or more English books. In an English speaking environment, one parent or both will say a few English words when they communicating in Chinese. One of the parents interviewed said that there were more English books than Chinese books in his house. While some children with low English proficiency don't have any prior experience of reading an English book or listening to any English. Parents with higher SES are more likely to send their children to a variety of commercial English learning institutions or receive one on one foreign teacher service on line or off line. While most parents with lower SES have devoted much less in children's English studies, their children won't start to learn language until they are enrolled by an elementary school. According to the statistics, the average expenditure on English education in urban regions in Dalian is about 5000yuan, with the highest 55,000 yuan. While in suburban regions, the money spent on English study is less than 1000 yuan, with the lowest zero.

Parental factors have a major influence on children's English proficiency. Children from suburban regions lag behind other children in English proficiency because of the disadvantage of parental factors. Family SES determines children's educational resources and the lack of access to good recourses and early English study institutions will increase this gap again, leaving these children more likely to be in the academic failure in the future. This echoes the research of Selman [6], who stated that a preschool education improves

school readiness, while children of low SES who receives limited preschool education are at a disadvantage when they receive public education.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Comprehensive Scientific Committee on Early Childhood Development in the United States pointed out, “Enrollment is an important turning point, individual differences between what children know and what they can do begin to indicate a long-term pattern of learning and achievement. [7]” Therefore, many countries have adopted early compensatory education policies for vulnerable groups in order to encourage socially disadvantaged children to stand on the same starting line as other children when they enter primary school formally.

In Dalian, parents with high socioeconomic status in urban regions can provide higher quality foreign language education for their children, while in the suburbs with backward economic development are facing the difficulties of lacking of foreign language education resources. This gap in resources has brought about great differences in the English proficiency of preschool children. Therefore, it is necessary for the education sector to attach great importance to the imbalance of development, and take measures to balance educational resources and narrow regional disparities.

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