

Taiwanese Mothers as Their Child's First English Teacher: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

In Taiwan, current policy encourages parents to participate fully in their children's education and to regard themselves as their children's first teacher. There is, however, little data about whether mothers do indeed perceive themselves as a "teacher" of English language and literacy to their pre-school-aged children in home contexts. Nor is it clear how they enact this role and responsibility during everyday interactions with their children. This study investigated Taiwanese mothers' views about their role in their children's English language learning. Six mothers of children aged three to six years participated in an extended semi-structured interview. While mothers used the term "teaching" to refer to their practices with their child, their views about appropriate practices and their perceived capability as a parent-teacher varied considerably. The findings contribute to our understanding of how mothers respond to, and are affected by, educational policies regarding English language learning in very young children.

Keywords : Taiwanese mother, early childhood, EFL, mothers' beliefs

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The issue of family involvement in children's education has become a focus of recent educational reforms in the Asia-Pacific region, including Korea (Bae-Suh, 2012) and Taiwan (Cheng, 2001; Hung, 2007; Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2006a). The Taiwanese government has encouraged increased parental involvement in educational planning and decision making (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2006b). Taiwanese parents are not only encouraged to participate in their child's education at elementary and junior high school levels, through supervision of children's learning activities inside and outside school, and direct communication with teachers, but are also being encouraged to regard themselves as their children's "first teacher" at home, before their child commences formal schooling (Beckert et al., 2004; Chen & Luster, 2002). For example, under the national legislation, parents are expected to be actively involved in teaching values and ethics to their children. Meanwhile, early childhood educators have the task of convincing parents to see themselves as their children's first teachers, such as the preschool learning arrangement at home to prepare children for the classroom. This approach appears to contrast with more traditional values, according to which qualified teachers, rather than parents, are seen as having authority and responsibility for all matters pertaining to children's education. In the home context, the processes of "teaching" and "disciplining" are typically seen as being inextricably connected. The Chinese notion "Guan Jiao" (管教) is heavily emphasized in Chinese culture (Chan, Bowes, & Wyver, 2009). The term "guan" means to govern and discipline, while "jiao" means to teach or to train. Thus the idea that the responsibility of parents is to both teach and discipline their children is deeply embedded in Taiwanese culture. This is evident in the well known Chinese expression "yang bú jiao, fù zhī guò 養不教, 父之過", which is loosely translated to mean "bad parents rear, but do not teach, their children." The term "teach" in this context does not refer to formal academic teaching, however, but rather more general discipline in life.

It is frequently suggested that in Taiwan, as in other Chinese cultures, Confucianism is highly influential in shaping educational theory and practice (Hsieh, 2004; Shih, 2010; Yim, Lee, & Ebbeck, 2011, 2013). According to this philosophy, children are seen as malleable, and in need of direct teaching and explicit instruction if they are to learn effectively (Johnston & Wong, 2002). Personal effort is highly valued. Children are expected to study hard even at the pre-elementary school level. Some preschool and kindergarten teachers assign homework

to be completed by children in order to revise what they have learnt during the day. Homework may take the form of completing worksheets and drag-and-match activities, reviewing Chinese phonics and reading storybooks in Chinese or English languages. Homework can also be seen as a strategy for promoting parents' involvement in their child's education. For example, in the Project approach, which was adopted by many early childhood educators in Taiwan (Liu & Chien, 1998), young children need their parents' help in finding resources and materials to complete their projects. This view of how parents can be involved in their children's learning has implications for the manner in which mothers interpret their role as their child's teacher at home.

English language learning is highly valued in Taiwan. Some research indicates that many Taiwanese parents would like to see their children start learning English language prior to the commencement of formal school (Chang, 2006; Oladejo, 2006; Shang, Ingebritson, & Tseng, 2007). To this end, some parents send their children to whole-English or Chinese-English bilingual institutes or English coaching schools, despite the fact that whole English early childhood institutions are prohibited (Chou, 2009; Din, 2005; Lan, Degotardi, & Torr, 2011). To fulfill the spirit of the Article 5 of "Children and Youth Welfare Act of 2003", the Taiwanese government prohibits explicit teaching of English language in prior to elementary school.

The Taiwanese government, however, suggests that if parents would like to introduce English language to children and enhance their interest in English in the years prior to formal school, parents can "co-learn" with their children using informal and playful methods, such as playing English games, singing nursery songs and shared reading of English language picture books (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004). The extent of parent interest in the home teaching of English is reflected in the fact that the author of one of Taiwan's best-selling books is a mother who explains how she taught English to her children at home (Wang, 2008). Recent research has suggested that parents are indeed adopting home-teaching methods. Lan, Degotardi and Torr (2011), for example, found that many Taiwanese mothers of three to six-year-old children are positive toward EFL teaching and learning prior to formal schooling and believe that early childhood is an important time for EFL learning. Lee (2010) found that Taiwanese parents of successful third- grade English learners tended to engage their children in shared book reading. Lan, Torr, and Degotardi (2011, 2012) also report the importance of

shared book reading, but also found that parents wished to cultivate the child's interest in English through playful engagement as well as through the use of learning resources, such as English language books, toys and computer media for EFL learning. This view of children and how they learn has implications for the manner in which mothers interpret their role as their child's first English teacher and raises questions about how Taiwanese mothers construe the Taiwanese government's emphasis on their role as their child's first English "teacher."

Although previous research has investigated Taiwanese mothers' beliefs, parenting goals and behaviors in general (Beckert, Strom, Strom, Yang, & Shen, 2005; Chen & Luster, 2002), mothers' beliefs and expectations regarding their preschool aged children's English language education have received scant empirical attention. Yet, as Oladejo (2006) argued, aligning reforms with parents' perceptions is crucial for formulating a stable language education policy in Taiwan. He strongly recommends that, prior to the implementation of educational reforms, parents' perceptions and expectations should be investigated and considered. Little research has focused specifically on whether Taiwanese mothers conceive of themselves as English "teachers" of their preschool aged children, and if so, how they enact that role in everyday life. Do they interpret teaching in traditional Confucian, teacher-directed terms? What do they see as their responsibility regarding their child's English language education, and what do they see as their child's own responsibility and duty? What challenges do they face when attempting to teach their child English? The exploration of these questions forms the basis of this study.

As many mothers of young children in Taiwan are employed outside the home, it is also important to determine the pragmatic issues involved for them as they try to enact the government's suggestion of introducing English to their child and enhancing their English learning interest in the home prior to school commencement. Specifically the following research questions are addressed:

- How do Taiwanese mothers of preschoolers interpret and enact their roles and responsibilities in relation to their child's English as a foreign language (EFL) development in the years prior to elementary school?
- What challenges do mothers encounter when they assume a teaching role during everyday interactions with their children?

Methodology

Data Collection

The participants were six mothers who had children aged between three and six years at the time of the study. They were recruited during the course of a larger study which surveyed the beliefs and practices of Taiwanese mothers in relation to their child's development of English and Chinese language and literacy. Participants were recruited through licensed day care centers and kindergartens in Tainan City and Tainan County, in the southern part of Taiwan where the study was conducted. Before commencing the interviews, the first author explained the goals of the study to the mothers and obtained their informed consent to participate in the study. The mothers were assured their participation was completely voluntary and that all responses would be kept strictly confidential. Moreover, the mothers were assured that the findings from the study may be published in referred and professional journals or at conferences and that pseudonyms will be used in the reports to protect privacy. All the interviews covered a similar set of topics, including mothers' views about how English is best taught to preschoolers, about how they support their child's English language learning in the home, and about their child's own attitudes and behaviours surrounding their English language development. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and ranged in length from 24 minutes to 2 and a half hours. The participants were encouraged to follow issues and angles of particular interest to them. One mother delved into other areas of interest, such as her new future career as well as the issues about new immigrant mothers. One mother tended to respond to interview questions by using very short answers or phrases. Three interviews took place in a quiet room located in the mothers' working places, two were in family living rooms and one interview was in a quiet room in the kindergarten attended by the participant's children. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed and conversational manner.

Participants

Table 1 shows the age, highest educational qualification, profession and number of children

of the 6 participants. All 6 mothers were married to husbands who were equally highly educated and employed fulltime as teachers or professors. Both Mandarin and Taiwanese languages were spoken by five of the families. All of the mothers were able to speak English but only 3 of them reported that they could do so fluently and confidently, having lived and studied in the USA for at least 3 years.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

Name	Educational Level	Number of Children	Language Spoken at Home	Age	Mother's Vocation	Length of Interview (hrs: mins)
Ah-Sing	Master	2	Mandarin and Taiwanese	31-39	Assistant Professor in a University of Technology	01:04
Yi-An	Master	2	Mandarin and Taiwanese	40-49	Lecturer in a University of Technology	00:45
Li-Li	Bachelor	1	Mandarin and Taiwanese	40-49	Special education teacher in a public primary school	02:36
Shu-Feng	Master	1	Mandarin and Taiwanese	40-49	Associate Professor in a University of Technology	01:22
Ling-Ling	Master	2	Mandarin	31-39	High school teacher	01:07
Huei-Huei	Master	3	Mandarin and Taiwanese	40-49	English teacher and owner of an English coaching school	00:24

Data Analysis

Since the three authors are one native Chinese speaker and two native English speakers, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese and translated into English so that the authors could discuss the interview data together to examine and compare the data within and across the categories to finalize themes. The transcriptions and the translations of interviews were then returned to the interviewees to ensure that the original and translated transcripts accurately expressed their views. One interviewee added several sentences as she felt that she had not responded adequately to one question in the original interview.

The transcribed interviews were then analysed according to the grounded theory methods developed by Glaser and Strauss (1977; see also Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially the authors reviewed the interview data independently times to get a broad understanding and conducted open coding of the interview transcripts. We met regularly to discuss the translations of

interviews to detect the initial pattern and trends in the data. Then, the common patterns were pasted on an Excel sheet to facilitate inductive categorization. A code was then assigned to each pattern taking into account the context of mothers' role for their child's EFL learning. The initial codes were compared and contrasted, to build up a number of concepts which appeared to be emerging from the data. These were then gradually amended to eliminate redundancies and to propose a number of categories. These categories were then grouped according to different features and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, a number of patterns related to the research questions were identified and were then organized thematically. The resulting themes are described in the following section.

Findings

Themes clustered around the participants' ideas about teaching English to young children. Three broad categories were identified; the mothers' role, the child's role and the pressures and constraints experienced by the mothers in attempting to fulfill their English teaching role. Within each category, 1 to 3 themes were identified, making 6 themes in total. Each theme captures a particular view about the processes and challenges associated with adopting the 'first EFL teacher' role. Each theme will be discussed in turn.

Mothers' Perception of Their Role in Their Child's Learning

The mothers described their engagement with their child's English development in terms of the roles they saw themselves enacting. These roles included (i) mother as teacher, (ii) mother as assistant and (iii) mother as resource provider. We discuss each in turn.

Mother as teacher. Several mothers explicitly described their English-based activities with their child as "teach" or "teacher", with responses suggesting that they believed that they had the capacity to actively instruct their child in the area of EFL learning. They expressed confidence in their own English proficiency and in their capacity to teach their child English. This can be seen in Ling-Ling's statement which posits a direct cause-effect relationship

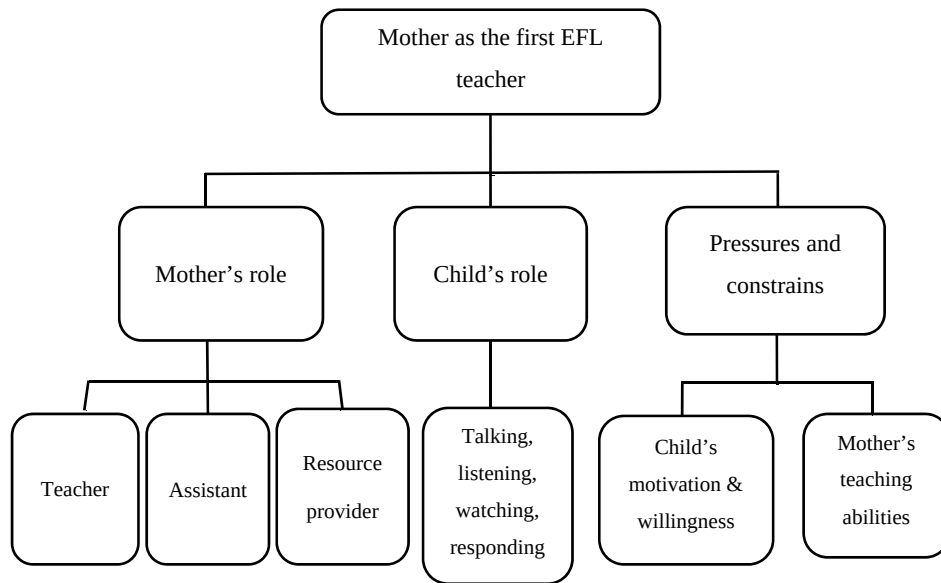


Figure 1. Themes and Codes Identified in the Interviews

between her pedagogical input and her child's subsequent knowledge of English: 因為我們都沒有教過他, 所以他都不會 (*We never taught him colors, so he did not know the answers*). These highly articulate mothers, like school teachers, set their child relatively formal learning tasks and activities with specific outcomes in mind, such as an increase in the child's vocabulary, or comprehension of English texts, or progress towards native-like pronunciation. These confident mothers tended to foreground their own role in bringing about their child's learning, and saw themselves as having equivalent effectiveness as school teachers. For example, Li-Li noted 父母是第一步啊, 如果父母沒有辦法的時候, 你才從學校老師那邊學 (*Parents are at the starting point. If the parents cannot [teach their children], they learn from school teachers.*)

Not all the mothers, however, felt capable of acting as an “English teacher” for their child. One mother stated that she had no idea about teaching English as a foreign language and would prefer to send her children to an English coaching school when they are older. Ah-Sing explained 我們可能沒有那個方法, 那我相信補習班的老師。應該說我會把我定位在輔助的角色。那她正規的學習方式是在補習班。(*I do not have the pedagogy of teaching English. So I choose to trust the teacher at the cram schools. I just play the role of helper. She*

will learn mainly at the English cram school.) Yet in her decision making, this mother nevertheless demonstrated through her language an understanding of educational principles and practices, even though she disavowed having the requisite expertise in the specific area of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching.

Mother as assistant. Contrast to the role of teacher, some mothers expressed that they adopted a role of assistant by reinforcing activities or concepts that had been actively taught at school. Some mothers tended to assume a more auxiliary, rather than proactive, decision-making role in their children's English learning, by assisting their child to complete tasks and homework set by external educators. This assistance consisted mainly of supervising the child's homework and helping the child to memorize what he or she learnt at preschool or English coaching school. Shu-Feng said that 他拿作業回來, 我還要陪做作業, 要慢慢學習怎麼樣在家裡帶那種正規功課 (*He has homework and I sit with him while he finishes it. I am learning how to help him at home with that kind of formal school assignment.*) Mothers' assistance can take a very direct form. Huei-Huei, when supervising her son's completion of his homework from the English coaching school, described how she held his hand to help him to complete a school-based task. 剛才在幫他複習功課, 也有一點點寫, 只是.....其實我是牽他的手 (*I was helping him with his homework. There was a small writing exercise. He writes because I hold his hand to write.*)

Mother as resource provider. Mothers were recognized as resource provider as mothers searched for English language learning resource to support and to influence their child's EFL learning. All the mothers spoke of the ways they provisioned the environment to support their child's English (or Chinese) learning, suggesting that they regarded resources such as books, DVDs, tapes, and educational toys as having an important influence on their child's English language development. It was evident through the mothers' descriptions that they devoted much time and thought into choosing and accessing English teaching resources. They believed that such resources play a key role in teaching their child English. Mothers generally decided what books to purchase, although they sometimes let children choose their own books from the library. However, even in the case of library borrowings, mothers exercised control over their children's choices. Shu-Feng decided what books her son could borrow

from the library, as she pointed out that he always chose books about trains and she wanted him to read books on other topics 他怎麼挑他還是那一類型的, 所以有時候我會主動性幫他. (*He always chooses books about trains so I offer my help to choose the books.*) Other factors which mothers said they took into account when purchasing English language books included the reputation of the authors, the beauty of the illustrations, interesting plot lines and books with repetitive language patterns. Ling-Ling always checked information from the Internet before she bought or borrowed the books. Li-Li bought imported English teaching materials not only because they are very cheap but also they include guessing games and activities for children to operate with their hands. She believed that imported English language books were both informative and helpful for children's literacy development. 我會覺得跟生活連結的東西是讓孩子能夠最快學到東西的 (*Those that are related to real life are the most helpful for children to learn from, according to my professional opinion.*)

The Child as Learner of English

Just as the mothers' use of the term "teacher" shed light on how they see their role in their child's English language learning, so too their descriptions of their child's behaviours and activities shed light on how they perceive what "learning" is and how it occurs. Mothers used a range of expressions to describe the child's role in the language learning process. The child was not usually represented as one who initiated or actively sought out language learning experiences for themselves; rather the child's role was usually characterized in terms of degrees of involvement and interest in activities chosen for them by others, usually by their mothers or English teachers. Mothers referred to the following activities which their child engaged in to learn English:

- Talking with native English speakers. Two mothers (Huei-Huei and Yi-An) believed interacting with native English speakers was necessary for their children to gain excellent English pronunciation.
- Listening to stories and songs. All the mothers referred to the value of English language stories and songs, especially those provided by English DVDs and videos.
- Responding to flash cards. This was seen as a positive activity for children to learn English.

- Watching television programs. Mothers believed that their child could learn English through watching television programs and cartoons.
- Filling out worksheets. Mothers noted the value of repetition and memorizing for their child's English development.

Challenges Associated with the Teaching Role

It was clear from the interviews that all the mothers were strongly committed to their child learning English as they believed it to be in the best interests of their child. They wished to enhance their child's readiness for school, by reducing potential stress and fear of learning foreign languages. 我覺得她是在學齡前學得，是可以讓她在進到小學這個剛開始的階段，會比較沒有那麼大的壓力、沒有那麼辛苦 (Mother Yi-An) (*I think what she learns at preschool age is for her to be less stressful when she starts the formal schooling.*)

It was also clear, however, that mothers experienced considerable difficulties in their efforts to teach English to their child. Yi-An noted that mothers may not be the most effective teachers of their own children: 總覺得自己的小孩很難教，給別人教比較快 (*It is difficult for me to teach my own children. You may see their learning results in a shorter time if you have them be taught by other teachers.*) There was the suggestion that the nature of the relationship between a mother and child may in itself affect a child's motivation and willingness to learn, in the more formal sense implied by the term "teach". 小孩子的學習態度會比較沒有那麼的強，學習意願，她可能想說媽媽...隨便啦，就愛聽不聽的 (Mother Yi-An) (*I think the children's learning attitude may not strong enough positive. Their learning willingness may be influenced by the teaching role. They might be careless about what their mothers teach.*)

As noted in the profile of the interviewees (Table 1 above), all the mothers were engaged in full time employment outside the home. This impacted upon their ability to engage in the teaching practices encouraged by the Taiwanese government. Some mothers highlighted their tiredness and lack of time to engage with their children. Shu-Feng explained 我有時候是心有餘力不足 (*Sometimes, my mind wants to do it but my physical body fails.*) The pressure of household chores and the need to care for other family members made it difficult for some mothers to spend time teaching their child English. Ling-Ling said 我覺得整天那個瑣事很

多, 整天忙的團團轉 (*I am also taking care of my children and have to do so many chores every day. I am busy all day with tedious things.*) One mother had decided to discontinue her higher degree education in order to give herself more time to devote to her children.

At least one mother described how a lack of money to purchase English educational toys and other resources limited her capacity to provide for her child's English development. Huei-Huei: 也是沒有那麼多錢啦 (*Oh. I don't have much money for those [educational toys]. They cost money.*)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was designed to explore whether and if so how 6 Taiwanese mothers of preschool aged children construed their role as their child's "first English teacher". The study was motivated by anecdotal evidence such as best seller books and recent Taiwanese government initiatives which have prohibited whole English and Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens but encouraged mothers to introduce English to their children through informal means at home. We were interested to explore this issue as there has traditionally been a clear delineation in many Asian cultures between parental roles and responsibilities on the one hand and teacher roles and responsibilities on the other (Kim & Kwon, 2002; Yang & McMullen, 2003). In a major social transition, parents are being encouraged to involve themselves in their child's education and early childhood teachers are expected to convince parents "to see themselves in a new context – as their children's first teachers who should arrange preschool learning at home" (Beckert et al., 2004). Given the "English fever" prevalent in many Asian countries, we were especially concerned to explore mothers' teaching practices in the home and whether they adopted the new role assigned to them.

Our first question concerned the extent to which Taiwanese mothers of preschoolers interpreted and enacted their roles and responsibilities in relation to their child's English language development in the years prior to elementary school. The mothers in this study were all highly educated, articulate and committed to their child's English language development. Several of the mothers adopted an explicit teaching role, making decisions about appropriate English books and audiovisual materials to engage their child, and requiring the child to

complete worksheets and undertake other learning activities. They closely monitored their child's learning and were confident in their pedagogical decision making. Other mothers however appeared less willing to accept a role as their child's "English teacher". They confined their activities to assisting their child to complete educational activities set by a professional teacher. For example, one mother explained that she lacked confidence altogether in her ability to teach English as a foreign language and decided to send her child to an English coaching school.

Our second question sought to understand the challenges associated with attempting to teach English at home on both mothers and their preschool aged children. It was clear from the interviews that mothers found teaching children at home was neither a straightforward nor easy role to play. Mothers spoke of their tiredness and difficulty in finding the time and energy to engage with their child in this way. They had to make financial and personal sacrifices to enact the role of their child's first English teacher, similar to previous studies that have examined Chinese parents' attitudes to their children's education in general (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Ho, Chen, Tran, & Ko, 2010) and immigrant Korean mothers' sacrifices for children's benefits and academic excellence (Park & Jegatheesan, 2012). They also had to deal with interpersonal difficulties in their relationship with their child. The competing and often mutually exclusive roles of teacher-pupil and mother-child had to be bridged to successfully implement the government's suggestion of home-based teaching of English. This proved a difficult task and raised many issues surrounding the changing nature of traditional Taiwanese society, underpinned by Confucian values of respect for and unquestioning obedience to parents (Luk-Fong, 2005). There was evidence that mothers also appeared to be influenced by western values and practices, such as the importance of children's interest and engagement in their learning, and the effectiveness of play-based learning materials.

Despite their difficulties, the mothers never questioned their ability to make a positive difference to their child's English language development, whether in a teaching or assisting capacity, suggesting not only a strong belief in the value of academic achievement but also in the value of effort and hard work. They also expected their children to work hard, which may appear to contradict a play-based informal pedagogy. At the same time, they valued a warm and responsive relationship with their child.

Limitations of the Study

Like all interview based studies, it is impossible to generalize the findings of this study to the wider Taiwanese community. The participants were all highly educated and articulate professionals. The views and ideas of mothers from diverse backgrounds are also needed to provide a more balanced view of the current situation in Taiwan. Secondly, each mother was only interviewed once. It was not possible to follow up the mothers as their children grew older and enter a formal educational setting. Thirdly, the present study did not investigate the children's actual English language outcomes, so it is impossible to make judgments as to the effectiveness or otherwise of the pedagogical practices reported by the mothers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study has investigated some of the challenges faced by mothers attempting to implement the Taiwanese government's English language policy for children under 6 years of age. It suggests that mothers endorse the government's policy of encouraging mothers to teach English to their child themselves. It has identified some of the factors affecting mothers' desire and capacity to play this role. The findings suggest that more support may be needed for mothers working full time, for example more flexible work arrangements and the availability of part time work during the year prior to their child commencing school. The findings could also inform parenting education programs provided by the government as part of their implementation of this policy.

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