

Supporting Children to Learn English in Chinese Kindergarten

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Abstract: Most Chinese students learn English as a second language after they go to primary school. However, many articles showed that the best period of children to learn English was three years old to six years old. As researchers, we believe that Chinese children should learn English in kindergarten. We aim to find out from graduate Chinese students in Auburn University in the United States if Chinese children should learn English in kindergarten. We used qualitative research method, and thirteen participants who are graduate students in Auburn University were interviewed. We used a questionnaire to ask all participants seven questions. The results showed that 38% of participants studied English in kindergarten and 62% of interviewees learned English in primary school. Nine participants agreed that children should learn English in Chinese kindergarten, as they believed that children had strong ability to accept new knowledge at early ages. By doing this research, we want to help Chinese parents to realize that learning English at early ages is very important for every child, and we need to create a good environment for Chinese children to learn English.

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1 Introduction

In the United States, more than 50% children learned English as a second language in American kindergartens (Gray and Fleischman, 2004)^[1]. Because of the Chinese educational system, Chinese public kindergartens

do not set up English classes, most Chinese students study English in primary school. Also, many Chinese parents do not support their children to learn English in kindergarten, as they believe that their children should spend more time studying the first language because it builds better basics.

By reading articles about English acquisition, many researchers have supported that learning English in kindergarten has many advantages. According to Tekin (2015), children could improve their academic achievement if they learned English at early ages^[2]. Because early-age foreign language learners had good skills in reading, speaking and writing (Sun, 2013)^[3]. Besides, a lot of studies have stated that it could improve children's intelligence when they studied a second language (Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008)^[4]. Learning English as a second language at an early age could help children develop their cognition (Tekin, 2015)^[2]. Also, some articles have stated that the best time for children to learn a second language was in the range of 3-6 years age. Maja (2014) and Brumen(2011) both stated that preschool was the most important period for children to learn a second language^[5], because of intrinsic motivation, children were more likely to seeking activities that related to second language acquisition, and they would be eager to achieve their accomplishments, so children should learn a second language in kindergarten^[6].

In addition, some articles stated that parents and teachers encouraged children to learn English in kindergarten. According to Fojkar (2017), researchers had interviewed teachers who worked in preschool. For these teachers, they believed that children would become more multicultural if they began to study English in

kindergarten, and they could learn various cultures after they learned English^[7]. Gocer (2010) pointed out that teachers who taught English as a second language in Turkey promoted students to study English at their early age. They often used text books to teach students to learn English, but they planned to use new teaching materials, such as CDs and videos^[8].

Thus, researchers believe that doing research about Chinese students on learning English is required. The interview of thirteen graduate students in Auburn University reveals the importance of the topic, which gives children chances to be exposed to English environment in early childhood, so as to raise their interests and to prepare them for a better future because of learning English early.

2 Method

This research was done to find out opinions of Chinese graduate students in Auburn University that if Chinese children should learn English in kindergarten. Even though English learning in Chinese kindergarten is a popular topic, there were not many articles which compared Chinese students who learned English in kindergarten with children who studied English in primary school, let alone giving some advice about the best time to learn English for Chinese students. Researchers would do the research according to their goals and topic in March and April, 2018.

2.1 Participants

Researchers intend to collect data from a small number of Chinese graduate students who are participating in Auburn Global program, which is an English learning program in Auburn University. Thirteen Chinese graduate students were interviewed about their experiences in learning English. The information of whom studied English in kindergarten and whom first came into contact with English in primary school would be collected and analyzed in our research.

2.2 Instrument

Researchers chose a qualitative research method to complete this study, which included interviews with seven basic questions and individualized probes based on each of their answers. They signed agreements with interviewees in order to protect all of the participants' privacy and let them know that their answers would represent their experiences of learning English. There are seven questions on the questionnaire. Questions are

as follows:

(1)As a Chinese student in Auburn University, did you learn English in kindergarten or primary school? If not, when did you start to learn English?

(2)Why did you learn English?

(3)How did you feel when you studied English for the first time?

(4)What are your current feelings about your experiences of learning English?

(5)As a Chinese student of Auburn Global, do you think that Chinese children should learn English during kindergarten, primary school or later? Why?

(6)If you have a child, will you support him/her to learn English in Chinese kindergarten? Why or why not?

(7)According to your experiences, how will you support your child learning English?

2.3 Data Collection

The address where researchers interviewed thirteen Chinese students is Auburn University. When they did the data collection, only the information of graduate students who studied in Auburn Global and learned English in kindergarten or primary school would be collected. Researchers interviewed participants face to face, noted all of the answers down, and classified similar answers together, as it was a good strategy to gain insights into participants' perspectives about the phenomenon under study (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996)^[9]. Since there could be more questions and answers than we expect during the interview, we audio recorded and wrote all of the details down. We would also analyze and interpret participants' answers. After we finished our first interview (interviewed four students), we would analyze the information. It was a good way to help us apply theory to practice, as we would focus on interview rather than literature review. According to the research purpose and questionnaires, we would connect the data of the same type of the answers, and we could count the number of the same type of the answers we classified in order to analyze the data easily (Durdella, 2019)^[10].

2.4 Data Analysis

During the data collection, we would use memos to record the brief summaries and important points we collected to smoothen our study progress (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996)^[9]. After the data collection, open coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was conducted based on the data that we organized into various categories

in the progress of data coding^[11]. We each examined the data separately, compared and categorized them carefully in order to improve the validity and reliability (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996)^[9].

3 Results

According to the interview, it was found that five Chinese graduate students studied English when they were in kindergarten, and eight students took English classes in primary school. However, one participant stated that her mother thought that English was very important for her future, so she was sent to English institutions to learn English as a second language before she entered into kindergarten (Figure 1).

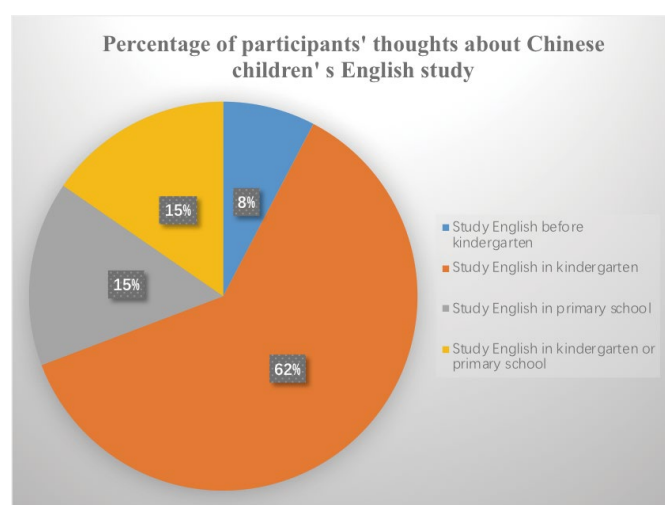


Figure 1. Percentage of participants' thoughts about Chinese children's English study

Most of the interviewees (70%) thought Chinese children should learn English at early age. Even

though 15% of participants did not think so, 62% of participants strongly agreed that it was important for children to learn English in kindergarten. They believed that Chinese children would have more benefits if they studied English in kindergarten. Interviewees pointed out that children's brains were on the way developing in children's childhood and they had the ability to learn new things very quickly. Learning English would help them open a new door, which means that it could help them to get new knowledge, such as foreign cultures. If children studied English in kindergarten, it would help them to prepare for the hard English study after they went to high school.

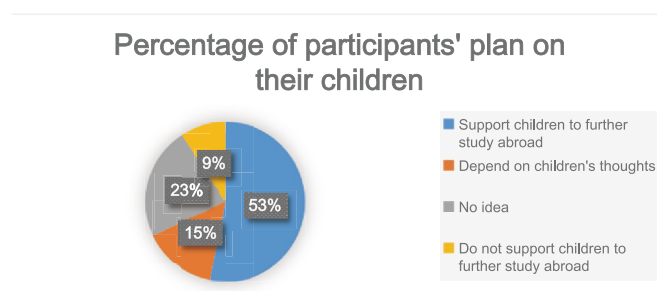


Figure 2. Percentage of participants' English plan of their own child

Depending on figure 2, one of interviewees did not want to send their children to study in overseas as he thought it was not necessary. However, more participants (53%) would support their children to study abroad. They wanted to send children to study abroad at different ages. One participant expected her child to study abroad in kindergarten. One interviewee wanted to send her child to primary school overseas. Five people hoped their children could go abroad to study courses in high school or college (Table 1).

Table 1. How to support children to study English

Types of kindergarten	Number of students	Extra English training institution
private kindergarten	10	No
Public kindergarten	3	Yes

Ten respondents wanted to send their children to go to private kindergartens, such as international kindergartens, where there are some foreign teachers whose English is first language. They wanted their children to study in a pure English environment in kindergartens if they did not need to consider the economic factor. However, few respondents planned to send their children to go to public kindergartens, and they chose different ways to help their children to acquire second language. Their children would have extra-curricular English classes on weekends. During

the summer holiday, they planned to take their children to travel in foreign countries or send their children to join a summer camp abroad.

4 Discussion

According to open-ended questions in the questionnaire, all participants shared their experiences of learning English as a second language. The common feeling, which they felt, was very relaxed and interesting when they learned English at the first time. For example, one interviewee Sarah described her experience of

English study: “when I was in the kindergarten, the English teacher taught us to sing English songs, like the “ABC”. I liked this way to learn English alphabet because I enjoyed music and felt very happy. Even though the participants gained experiences when they studied English in China for more than six years, all interviewees felt enormous pressure when they had to take English tests in high school. They did not like the feeling that they were forced to learn English. They did not like doing a lot of English homework everyday. They were frustrated in complex English grammar. They believed that forced English study policy would make students dislike learning English because children would have pressure. Therefore, they supported that kindergarten was a good place for children to learn English, and a pure English learning environment could help children get used of using English naturally. They hoped Chinese children could study English based on their own interests and with less pressure.

5 Conclusion

This work contributed to appealing Chinese people and Chinese government to value the benefits of learning English as a second language in kindergarten. This research supported the topic, which was that Chinese children learn English in kindergarten, as children learning English at early age was better than studying English at older ages. By interviewing thirteen Chinese graduate students, researchers found that, even though two participants preferred to support their children study English in primary school, most of the respondents chose to support their children to study English in kindergarten. However, the number of interviewees was limited. If we interviewed more participants, it could better support our research topic. Thus, researchers should focus on solving these problems in the future study.

As researchers and Chinese teachers, first, we should tell Chinese parents the advantages of learning English at early ages. Chinese parents need to help children to have a positive attitude toward learning English because parents’ attitudes can affect children’s thoughts on learning English. Second, when we plan to do activities in English class, it will be better to prepare some activities that are very attracted. We need to know what

children are really interested in and design teaching plans. Once children are fascinated in English, it will be good starts for them to learn English. What is more, balancing the English skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing is essential. Children can watch some foreign movies and read some original fairy tale books made in western countries. Thus, we believe that we should encourage Chinese children to learn English in kindergarten. We need to focus on improving their English and promoting them to use English in their daily lives.

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