

Do teacher-parent relationships have any impact on EFL language proficiency

Mehdi Latif

Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch

Abstract

Various studies focusing on the effectiveness of teacher-parents relationship emphasize the positive effects of parents' involvement in education. This study aimed to examine the effects of teacher-parents relationship on Iranians EFL learners' language proficiency at elementary level. It also aimed to find how this relationship may influence parents' motivation and attitude with regard to their role in education. In this study a permanent relationship with parents was created through writing weekly letters to them. By these letters parents were informed about absence or presence of their children, quality of doing assignments, children's behavioral problems, children's scores in class quizzes, etc. The results showed that permanent teacher-parents relationship can increase students' language proficiency and parents' motivation.

Key words: parents, parents' involvement, teacher-parent relationship, motivation, students' success

Introduction

Traditionally parents think that teachers and schools are the only responsible agents for their children's education and training. As teachers try to make a relationship with parents in order to involve them in their children's education, parents may perceive teachers as being incompetent. The teacher must enlighten the parents on the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional development of the child. Therefore, the teacher should display the activity of the child to the parents, for example, through films documenting the child's developmental stages, books, handiwork, and drawings made by the child (Tos, 2001). These reports should be shared so that each parent can view them and use them as examples. The parents wish to feel reassured that the teacher values the child and is concerned about him/her, and that the teacher needs their support for the successful performance of the child at school. The parents do not want to perceive the teacher as someone who accuses, judges, or influences their children. It is very important to communicate properly with the child, expecting responsible

behavior from him/her at home and at school, and consistently ensure that he/she abides by the rules. Parents have the knowledge, skills, and ability required for nourishing, nurturing, and supporting their children (Humphreys, 2000). Parents and teachers should make efforts to create a suitable learning environment for children. The first learning experience acquired by the child at home should support the efforts to learn at school. This would increase the success rate of the teacher in his/her class applications (Burns, Roe & Ross, 1992).

Consistent parent involvement dramatically increases the expectancy that suitable learning will occur in the classroom and at home. Parents play such a crucial role in their children's academic, physical, social, and moral development that we, as teachers, make a huge mistake if we view them as anything other than indispensable collaborators. It is not enough to keep parents pleased, appeased, or out of our hair. If we are committed to bringing the best out of our students and teaching the whole child, we need to build and maintain long-term relationships of loyalty, trust, and respect with their parents. Investing the time and effort to work closely with parents throughout the year maximizes our chances of fulfilling our mission and achieving our goals.

The following points provide a strong rationale as to why teachers should make parent involvement a top priority (Reifman, 2011): 1. Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. Though not all teachers are parents, all parents are teachers. As such, they have the greatest impact on a student's motivation to learn. Parents are usually eager to play a significant role in their children's education, but they often don't know how. By establishing caring relationships with parents, we can help them help their children. 2. Consistent communication between the home and school enables parents to reinforce the skills, knowledge, habits, and priorities that we emphasize in class. This fact is especially true in situations where our teaching methods and approaches may differ from the norm and require parent follow-up on a regular basis. 3. It is important that teachers are aware of students' strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, areas of special sensitivity, and any factors at home that are affecting school performance. Parents are in the best position to provide this information and are usually glad to do so when asked. 4. Students act, behave, and perform differently when they know that their parents and teachers communicate frequently. 5. Frequent communication earns parents' confidence, trust, and respect. With open lines of communication, it is unlikely that feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, and alienation will ever arise. The favorable impression that we create makes problems easier to solve when they occur. 6. When teachers and parents communicate in a respectful manner, we model positive adult interactions for the kids. These occasions serve a pro-social function because many children, unfortunately, do not often have the opportunity to observe this type of relationship. 7. Parents can become our biggest supporters and most loyal allies. Should a colleague or supervisor ever doubt our methods or question our approach to teaching, these allies will be there to come to our defense. 8. Parents are often valuable classroom resources. The better we know parents, the more we will be aware of the various ways in which they can assist the class. This assistance may come in such forms as classroom volunteering, donations of supplies and other materials, technology support, and arranging for special field trips. 9.

Forming trusting relationships with parents can reduce the feelings of isolation that so many teachers, especially newer ones, often experience.

Parents may not know how to be involved in their child's school (Feldman, 2003). They may be unsure of their role or what the school or teacher expects of them, which may keep them from becoming involved in the schools or may lead to a perception that they are not involved. Studies show that poor and minority parents are less likely to be involved in their child's education in the ways that schools would like them to be involved (Shannon, 1996). This does not necessarily mean that parents are not involved, but, rather, that the school does not acknowledge the type of help that parents are demonstrating. Both teacher and parents have the interest of the child in mind; however, their ideas of how to help the child with regard to school may differ (Howe, 2005). For example, some schools may expect parents to be involved in helping their child do homework and in reading to their child every night while other schools may interpret involvement as attendance at parent-teacher committee meetings and helping in the classroom. If a parent is helping with homework and the school expects them to be in the classroom, the school may report that the parent is not involved. Parents, too, may have a completely different view than the school about what role they are expected to play (Young & Westernoff, 1996). They may feel that they can best help their child by providing food and a loving environment, and that in this manner they are involved in the child's learning. Such differences in the interpretation of what constitutes parental involvement may lead to perceptions that parents are not involved. There are also teachers who believe that parents' lack of education is a reason why parents are not involved in their child's education (Shannon, 1996). There is significant research, nationally and internationally, to suggest that parental involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Cotton and Wikelund (1989) in their study on parental involvement in education propose that the more intensely parents are involved in their children's learning; the more beneficial are the effects on pupil achievement. Moreover, they state that this holds true for all types of parental involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of pupils.

According to Gould (1999) the research all shows that children do better in school when their parents are involved. He found that parents are involved in school in four ways. The first two are widely accepted: parents serve as teachers of their children at home and also serve as volunteers and supporters at school. The next two include parents becoming advocates for their children and decision-makers in school in such areas as school policy, hiring, and budget. It is easy to understand that not all administration and faculty would be comfortable with these last two. Hickman (1999) cited research which focused on secondary school level. These research findings provide seven types of parent involvement: (a) parent as communicator, (b) parent as supporter of activities, (c) parent as learner, (d) parent as advocate, (e) parent as decision maker, (f) parent as volunteer/professional, and (g) parent as home activities teacher.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study, as such, is to determine how teacher-parent relationship affects the Iranians EFL learners' language proficiency. It examines the extent to which this relationship can influence parents motivation. It also shows how teacher-parent relationship influences the parents' attitude and perception of language learning.

Method

As it was mentioned before this study was an attempt to investigate the effects of teacher-parent relationship on students' motivation, achievement, and English language proficiency. This section will describe the subjects under study and how they were selected for inclusion in this study. In addition, the instrument being used to collect information will be discussed as to its content. Data collection and analysis procedures will then be presented.

Participants

This study was conducted with the participation of fifty male elementary-level English language learners at Nikan Elementary School. The proficiency level of learners was determined by a placement test at the beginning of the term. The learners were tested by a multiple-choice exam at the beginning of the course in order to determine their level. The participants were between twelve to fourteen years old. They were at the pre-intermediate level who had studied English through Top Notch series (Saslow, J. & Ascher, A., 2006). They were grouped into two groups, control group and experimental group.

Instruments

The researchers utilized four sets of instruments for doing this research. The first instrument was a general proficiency test to make sure of learners' language ability and homogeneity of their levels. This test was adopted from Top Notch placement test (Saslow & Ascher, 2006). The second instrument was an attitude and motivation questionnaire, pretest, which was administered before and after the treatment. As the third instrument, a series of letters were sent to the learners' parents to inform them weekly. These letters contained information about what learners do during a week, their participation in the classroom activities, the quality of doing homework, learners' scores in different skills and activities such as speaking, listening, spelling, and handwriting. The fourth instrument was the repetition of the test trying to measure the course achievement and compare the results with those of the first interview used as the pretest. Cronbach' Alpha test was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire which proved the questionnaire very reliable (Cronbach' Alpha = 0.71).

Procedure

As the first step a class of twenty-five students was assigned to the experimental group and another class of twenty-five students was selected as the control group. Top Notch Achievement Test (Saslow & Ascher, 2006) was used as the pre-test for both groups to determine their level of language proficiency. Then the experimental and control groups received a four-month term of treatment. Parents in experimental group received a

questionnaire through which they represented their opinions and attitudes about being involved at school, participating in education, being in contact with teachers, and being responsible for the children's language learning. Parents were informed about their responsibility and their role in the research in detail. They became more aware of learning strategies. Then parents in the experimental group received weekly and sometimes daily reports in which they found information about the students. These letters informed parents of their children absence or presence in the classroom, the quality of their homework, scores, behavior, etc. Through these letters parents could be given advice, suggestions, and strategies to treat properly with their children. Parents also could communicate their opinions, suggestions and possible problems to the teacher through these letters. For example a letter might include: "Please control Ali's sleeping time. He looks very sleepy in the classroom during this week. He gets low scores in spelling. He needs to practice unit 2 new words every day during this week" or a teacher might receive a response involving: "Ali had flu this week. He could not finish his homework". Finally at the end of the term parents in the experimental group received a questionnaire to indicate how they thought about the effect of parent-teacher relationship, parents' involvement, and their ideas about language learning. Once the instruction period was over, the researcher conducted the post-test among the control and the experimental group to check whether there existed any statistically meaningful difference between the participants in the two groups due to the treatment.

Results

First, independent-samples t-test was used to compare the results of the pre-test in order to find out whether there were any statistically significant differences between the control and the experimental group at the beginning of the study. To analyze the results of the post-tests again independent-samples t-tests were run at the end of the study. The gain scores of the post-tests of each group were also calculated to find out if any significant improvements happened inside of each group or not. Another independent-samples t-test was used to compare the result of questionnaire which was given to the parents at the beginning and at the end of the term in order to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between first and second questionnaire or not.

This research was an investigation to see the effects of teacher-parents relationship on EFL learner language proficiency. It was an attempt to answer these questions: Does teacher-parent relationship have any significant effect on Iranians EFL learners' language proficiency? Does teacher-parent relationship have any significant effect on parents' attitude, perception of language learning and motivation?

As the first step the proficiency level of the learners was determined by a placement test at the beginning of the term. Twenty-five students were assigned to the control group and a class of twenty-five students was chosen as the experimental group. At the end of the term students' final examination scores in both groups were compared to determine the effects of the teacher-parents relationship on the students' language proficiency. As the second step at the beginning of the term parents in the experimental group were given a questionnaire in

order to test their motivation and attitude toward teacher-parents relationship and parental involvement. For the second time parents answered the items of this questionnaire at the end of the term when the study was finished. Then the parents' answers to sixteen questions of these questionnaires were compared.

In the following sections the results of each test will be put under investigation one by one to find out if there were any significant differences between the results of the control group and the experimental groups' tests or not and if there were any significant differences between the parents' motivation at the beginning of the term and at the end of the term or not.

Investigation of the first research question

Do the scores of students in experimental group significantly differ from pre-test to the post-test?

Table 1 shows the results of paired sample t-test through which the experimental group scores in the first and second tests were compared. By considering the mean of the first test which is 14.26 and the mean of the second test which is 18.75 we can come to the conclusion that there is a significant improvement in the scores of the experimental group. *Table 2* shows that scores of students in the experimental group significantly differs from the first test at the beginning of the term to the second test at the end of the term. This shows that teacher-parent relationship has improved students' language proficiency.

Table1. Comparison of pre-test and post-test (experimental group)

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
sum of scores (1 st Test)	14.2600	25	.64542	.12908
sum of scores (2 nd Test)	18.7500	25	.69970	.13994

Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics t-test for the experimental group

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
1 st and 2 nd test	4.49000	.90133	.18027	-4.86205	-4.11795	-24.908	24	.0001

According to the above *T-Test Table*, Sig equals 0.0001 and it is smaller than 0.05. So we can conclude that students' scores on the second test in the experimental group are significantly

different from their scores on the first test. According to the results students in experimental group have got better and higher scores in second test than on the first test.

Investigation of the second research question

Do the scores of students in control group significantly differ from pre-test to the post-test?

Table 3 shows the results of paired sample t-test through which the control group scores in the first and second tests were compared. The mean of 14.36 for the first test and 14.88 for the second test also reveal the fact that the difference between the scores on the pre-test and the post-test was insignificant and that no improvements were achieved for the participants in the control group. Table 4 shows that scores of students in the control group do not significantly differ from the first test at the beginning of the term to the second test at the end of the term.

Table 3. Comparison of pre-test and post-test (control group)

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
sum of scores (1 st Test)	14.3600	25	.73272	.14654
sum of scores (2 nd Test)	14.8800	25	1.04176	.20835

Table 4. Paired Samples Statistics t-test for the control group

	Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
1 st and 2 nd test	.52000	.70589	.14118	-.81138	-.22862	-3.683	24	.622

According to the above T-Test Table, Sig equals 0.62 and it is greater than 0.05. So we can conclude that students' scores in the second test in the control group are not significantly different from their scores in the first test. Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that students in the control group have got higher scores on the second test but it is not a significant difference.

Investigation of the third research question

Do parents' attitude and motivation in the experimental group significantly differ from the first questionnaire to the second one?

Table 5 shows that parents' motivation and attitude toward teacher-parents relationship and parents' involvement changed from the first questionnaire to the second one. The mean of 39.96 for the first questionnaire and 59.88 for the second questionnaire also reveal the fact that the difference between the score on the first and the second questionnaire was significant. Thus, teacher-parent relationship positively influenced the parents' motivation in the experimental group.

Table 5. Comparison of parents' motivation through first and second questionnaire

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1 st questionnaire	39.9600	25	5.83438	1.16688
2 nd questionnaire	59.8800	25	2.60320	.52064

Table 6. Paired Samples T-Test (Parents' motivation)

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
1 st questionnaire and 2 nd questionnaire	19.92000	5.92256	1.18451	-22.36471	17.47529	-16.817	24	.000

According to Table 6, Sig equals 0.0001 and it is smaller than 0.05 so we can conclude that parents scores in the second questionnaire in experimental group are significantly different from their scores in the first questionnaire. So Table 5 and Table 6 show parents in experimental group have got better and higher scores in second questionnaire than the first questionnaire.

Thus, the following findings were attained. Research indicates that students and parents consider homework and home learning to be an important part of education. This relationship makes a positive attitude towards homework. The evidence further confirms that parents play an important role encouraging their children to spend time on home work and eliminating distractions such as watching television. Teacher parents relationship results in enhancing confidence, self-esteem, awareness that learning is a normal activity throughout life, pleasure from collaborative learning, parents increased confidence in contacts with school, teacher and

education system, leading better relationships with children, and understanding the strategies that can be used to help children to learn. By the end of the research parents increased their contact with their children's school and the number of parents actively involved in their children's school increased significantly. We found that mothers were more likely to say that they were very involved than fathers. Parents found that they had an equal responsibility with the school for their children's education. The continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through education system. The more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more the children tend to do well in school and continue their education. Students act, behave, and perform differently when they know that their parents and teachers communicate frequently. Taking the time to send out notes to parents throughout the school year – the notes must focus on both the positives and the negatives of the student in the classroom and must not be sent just to complain to parents about their child.

The research indicates that teacher-parent relationship decrease students behavioral problems in the classroom. Parents whose children have behavioral problems were invited to observe their children in the classroom and to attend in counseling sessions. They represented that their children problems have been solved after these treatments. After the study most parents were likely to have special program to check and control their children's education. Parents represented that they were interested to spend more time with their children after school time to talk about what happened in the classroom. In this study parents much preferred weekly letters to the other means of communication such as phone calls, e-mail messages, voice mail, and face to face meetings.

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