Abstract:

Children constantly move to the United States from different countries without knowing English. These children may be immigrants or have been raised with a language other than English. These young children, depending on their education and parental support, will or will not succeed in acquiring English as their second language. In order to educate these children correctly, we must understand ESL children and understand their parent’s opinion on learning the English language. By understanding this, we will be able to help young children acquire the English language more easily.

Introduction:

Out of approximately 260 million people ages 5 and over, 17.9% speak a language other than English at home (Census 2000). Of those people speaking a language other than English at home, 54.5% speak English very well but 7.1% do not speak English at all. The other 38.2% have a good understanding of the English language but still need to improve their language skills. Since a good background in English is an integral part of being successful in the United States, English as second language (ESL) programs are necessary to help non-English speaking people succeed.

ESL and bilingual programs began to grow when the immigration population increased in the 1950s. Universities were also receiving many international students who did not know English. The only approach towards this population was total immersion in all content-area classes taught in English. A change occurred after the Cuban revolution in 1959. Cubans settled in Miami, Florida where they organized all Spanish-speaking schools, in hope of returning to Cuba some day. When they realized that the politics in Cuba were not improving they decided to influence the public schools to begin bilingual classes. This was the first public school based bilingual program in the United States. After this first bilingual program, other programs emerged in Florida, and then spread throughout Texas by 1964 (Ovando & Collier, 1985).

The current status of bilingual education has been adapted under George Bush’s administration, creating the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Under Title III – Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students states:

“(1) to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging State academic
content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet;
“(3) to develop high-quality language instruction educational programs designed to assist State educational agencies, local educational agencies, and schools in teaching limited English proficient children and serving immigrant children and youth;
“(6) to promote parental and community participation in language instruction educational programs for the parents and communities of limited English proficient children;

These three Title III statements show that English proficient students should receive an education that will level them with any fluent English-speaking student, offer them the appropriate instruction to accomplish this and involve parents in their education.

There are many different approaches towards bilingual education. These methods include English immersion, where the education is fully English. Lessons should be taught in a simple method to help students learn English. English as a second language is another method similar to English immersion, adding the aid of a native speaking teacher. This method will guide children at the beginning of their English acquisition education. The next method is Transitional bilingual education. This method instructs students in their native language and dedicates particular amounts of time on their emerging English skills. Finally, there’s the Two-way bilingual education. This education results in bilingual students after being taught in two languages. The learning process for each of these methods will differ in every child.

Tabors (1997) described a developmental sequence for young children during their learning process in English acquisition:

1. There may be a period of time when children continue to use their home languages in the second-language situation.
2. When they discover that their home language does not work in this situation, children enter a nonverbal period as they collect information about the new language and perhaps spend some time in sound experimentation.
3. Children begin to go public, using individual words and phrases in the new language.
4. Children begin to develop productive use of the second language (p.39).

According to Tabors, when children start school without knowing English, they communicate the way they’ve always communicated, in their native language. They will speak their native language to teachers and their classmates. Children might realize that their language is not being understood the same day they start school as well as several days or even weeks after. The nonverbal period follows where they only speak to those who have their same native language. During this nonverbal period children need a way to communicate and they can do this in various ways. Face gestures are one of the ways a child will communicate, and manifest their feelings. Another way a child might communicate is through body language. Body movements such as shrugging of
shoulders or nodding of heads are usually seen in English learners. They may also use noise gestures and demonstrate their feelings through sound.

First signs of progress usually start out with sound experimentation and in no time they will start saying English words or move up to English phrases. The time it will take a child to start speaking English varies. Researchers believe that the earlier the child is exposed to the English language, the more quickly they will acquire the English language. Social factors will affect a child’s progress in the second-language acquisition process. Tabors mention four factors, which are motivation, exposure, age and personality (p.79). Parents also affect a child’s learning progress.

Parents will influence their child’s progress in many ways. Immigrant and migrant parents may be planning to return to their home land and not be interested in whether their child speaks fluent English (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 1999). This will affect the way they learn English and they may not even be open to learning English in school because their parents are not interested in it. There are other families that do not want their children to speak their native language in the classroom and only speak their native language at home. This will encourage them to speak English in school and be open to learn more. Once children begin learning English, may not even want to speak their native language at school or at home and always speak English because of perceived social pressures. Teachers can help influence the parents by involving them in their child’s education and may be able to change their perception towards their language acquisition.

In this research, we will interview the parents of young ESL children. We will inquire about their perceptions of education, what they like and dislike about the ESL program.

Methodology:

School Background

Juniata Junior High offers an ESL program for immigrant and migrant families during the summer. This school is located in Mifflintown Borough, Juniata County, Pennsylvania. Mifflintown is a rural area with a population of 861 residents (census 2000). Mifflintown is mainly an agricultural area. Out of the 861 residents about 300 are migrants.

These migrants are part of Lincoln Intermediate Unit (LIU) Number 12’s summer migrant employment programs.

The ESL program in Juniata County started 7 years ago, when a chicken farm moved from upstate New York to Mifflintown. This company recruits many workers from South America and Puerto Rico. Mifflintown started by receiving 6 or 7 families, which led to attracting other immigrant/migrant families. Juniata County was obligated to start an ESL program because of the large amount of families arriving without any knowledge of the English language.
Juniata County offers ESL summer programs for grades K-12 as well as Saturday ESL classes for adults. The program coordinators also offer home visits for a more individualized approach.

This summer’s program has approximately 100 students. The classrooms are divided into grades. For our research the kindergarten classroom was being observed. This classroom had approximately 15 children present. 60% were male and 40% were female. Their ages ranged between the ages of four and six. 60% of the students are Puerto Rican, 27% are from El Salvador and 13% are from Honduras. 20% of the class do not fully comprehend English and speak it less than very well.

The regular teacher (female) is white-American, while the ESL teacher (male) is Latina; the assistant (female) is also Latina. The assistant is a 17 year old female who is doing her senior year project. She is highly interested in ESL and chose this ESL classroom. Her project consists of 80 hours of work so is there everyday. She is from El Salvador and fluent in both English and Spanish. She is a big help in the classroom plus a guide for those children that do not understand English yet.

Participants

The participants of this study were 4 parents of young children in the kindergarten class from Juniata County’s summer migrant program. The four parents included a mother from El Salvador; a father from Honduras, another father from El Salvador and a mother form Honduras. Out of the four children being observed for this research, two were female and two were male.

Family Language Profile

For the parent’s comfort, the researcher conducted a series of questions with the parents in their native language. Tokuhama-Espinosa provided a Family Language Profile in her book, *Raising Multilingual Children* (2001). An adapted version by the researcher was used to gather the family’s background information.

The first participant is a mother from El Salvador. Her daughter is 4 years and 6 months old. She is an only child. The child’s home language is Spanish but speaks English very well. The child has the opportunity to speak her second language only at school. The participant mentions that the few English words she knows, she speaks with her daughter. She has been in an English school setting for two years and a half. Her mother considers that her child has a high aptitude for language learning. Personality wise, she considers her child to be between shy and outgoing.

The second participant is a father from Honduras. His son is 4 years and 8 months old. He is an only child. The child’s home language is Spanish and speaks English less than very well. He has been in an English school setting for a year including the summer program. The child has the opportunity to speak English only at school. His father
considers that his child has an average aptitude for language learning. Personality wise, he considers his child to be between shy and outgoing.

The third participant is a father from El Salvador. His daughter is 4 years and 11 months old. She is the youngest of three children. The child’s home language is Spanish but her mother and older siblings frequently speak English at home so she understood most English before starting the summer program. The child has the opportunity to speak English at home and in school. She started an English school setting this summer. She will begin kindergarten in the upcoming fall. Her father considers her to have a high aptitude for language learning. Personality wise, he considers his daughter to be outgoing.

The fourth participant is a mother from Honduras. Her son is 6 years old. He is the older of two children. The child’s home language is Spanish and speaks English very well. The child usually speaks English with his mother and Spanish with his father. The child has been in English school settings for three years. It took him over a year to speak English because he was diagnosed with a speech problem. Because of this problem, the mother spoke English at home to help him at school. She states that her son speaks Spanish with an English accent. His mother considers him to have an average aptitude for language learning. Personality wise, she considers her son to be very outgoing.

After getting to know the parent’s background another series of questions were made. These questions lean towards their opinion about their attitude towards their children’s ESL education. The following questions were asked to each parent:

- What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?
- What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?
- What interest do you have for your child to learn English?
- What progress have you seen in your child since he/she started the ESL program?
- What do you do at home to help your child with English?

**Results:**

*The results are translated from Spanish to English by the researcher.*

Parent #1: Mother from El Salvador with a 4 years and 6 months old daughter.

**Q** - What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?

**P#1** – There are many benefits of having my child learn English. First there’s the benefit of learning two languages. My child also helps me translate English to Spanish; she is constantly correcting me when I try to speak English.

**Q** – What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?

**P#1** – Well, there is a possibility that she can forget how to speak Spanish correctly.

**Q** – What interest do you have for your child to learn English?

**P#1** – I have a high interest for her to keep learning English because she needs it to communicate with everyone around here.
Q – What progress have you seen in your child since she started the ESL program?
P#1 – She learned English quickly. Her progress has been excellent. She loves learning English; she always brings books home with her and reads them to me.
Q – What do you do at home to help your child with English?
P#1 - The little English I know I try to practice with her.

Parent #2 – Father from Honduras with a 4 years and 8 months old son.

Q - What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?
P#2 – Hmm, there is so many! First of all he is able to relate with the community around him. He will have two languages and be able to help us learn English.
Q – What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?
P#2 – I believe that there are no disadvantages.
Q - What interest do you have for your child to learn English?
P#2 – I am very interested for my child to learn English, I think that learning English is like touching the sky. All I want for my child to be able to progress in life and have a good future.
Q – What progress have you seen in your child since she started the ESL program?
P#2 - Even though he’s had a little problem learning English, he is always showing enthusiasm and constantly pointing out at objects and naming them in English.
Q – What do you do at home to help your child with English?
My wife talks a little bit of English so she speaks what she knows.

Parent #3 – Father from El Salvador with a 4 years and 11 months old daughter.

Q - What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?
P#3 – The ability to communicate with English speaking people.
Q – What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?
P#3 - I don’t believe there are any disadvantages on learning English.
Q - What interest do you have for your child to learn English?
P#3 – I am very interested for her to learn English so she can be successful.
Q – What progress have you seen in your child since she started the ESL program?
P#3 - She has had excellent progress. She started an ESL program this summer and has not started school yet. She has only been two months in the program and she is speaking English very well. Her brothers helped her out though, they have been in the program for a couple of years and they always speak English around her. She picked it up rather fast.
Q – What do you do at home to help your child with English?
P#3 – My wife and kids speak to her in English.

Parent #4 – Mother from Honduras with a 6 years old son.

Q - What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?
P#4 – The ability to be an active member in our society.
Q – What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?
P#4 – I would have to say loosing his first language. He speaks English all the time and has been forgetting how to speak Spanish.
Q - What interest do you have for your child to learn English?
P#4 – I am very interested for him to learn English so that he can have two languages.
Q – What progress have you seen in your child since he started the ESL program?
P#4 – It took him a year to be able to speak English because he was diagnosed with a speech problem. After constantly seeing a speech pathologist, he improved. Right now he speaks English very well.
Q – What do you do at home to help your child with English?
P#4 – I speak English at home, so that I can help him keep his language skills and so that I can improve my own.

Discussion:

The results show each parent’s perception of their child’s language acquisition. Each child’s case is different. Many parents were open to their children learning English. Parents helped their children from the start even though they were concerned about the way they did it because of their child’s loss of the native language. To some parents this did not matter, their priority is that their child learns good English skills. We will discuss each question.

Q - What do you believe are the advantages of learning English?
All parents agreed on having two languages and being able to communicate with others. This is an advantage their children have over them, so they believe that it is an overall advantage. This is something that is not easy for them. It is more difficult for them to adapt to the new country while their children adapt at a rapid pace. Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson state:

The very fact that there is an intact language and culture in the home is likely to ensure that the parents in the family will not become integrated into the society of the new country. The situation for their children is, of course different. They will usually learn to master the language and culture fairly quickly, and may prefer and expect to live in the new country always. (P.9)

Q – What do you believe are the disadvantages of learning English?
Two parents answered that there were no disadvantages at all. Two parents mentioned how losing their native language is a disadvantage, because slowly they are forgetting it. The parents who believe that there are no disadvantages show pride in their child’s language ability. Even if it means English dominating more than Spanish, they approve this because of the opportunities they may be able to accomplish. The parents that mention the possibility of loosing their native language take much pride in their background. This will be a constant worry; that they lose their native language.

Q - What interest do you have for your child to learn English?
Every parent demonstrated high interest in his or her child learning English. Despite the possibility of losing English they do not get in the way of their children’s learning processes, they all encourage it.
**Q – What progress have you seen in your child since he started the ESL program?**

Every child has had different progress during its language acquisition. No matter how long it took the children to learn English, parents will still state that their children has had excellent progress, because they observe the ability they have to acquire the language quickly.

**Q – What do you do at home to help your child with English?**

Every parent tries to be involved in his or her child’s education. Some fathers don’t know any English but have their wives speak English to their children. They are conscious that they must maintain their native language at home, so they will not lose it. They still take time to speak the English that they know, to practice their own English and have their children practice as well.

**Conclusion:**

Parent perceptions were overall positive. For them it is a privilege for their children to have two languages. They are very proud of their children being bilingual. They also mention that they will be able to be active in our society, which is very important for them. Most of these families will stay in the United States, so they wish for their children progress in life. When parents have such a positive view towards their child’s bilingual education, we will see constant progress in their children, and expect brilliant futures out of them.

For this researcher, this was a beginning attempt to understand migrant/immigrant family perceptions of the importance of learning English for their young children. She realizes that this survey is a brief and certainly not random a random selection of families. However, it illustrated and documented the significance of family perceptions in learning English and the support that they might give to their young children who are learning English for the first time.

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