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**Parental Contribution to the Acquisition of Language Skills –  
A Case Study**

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**Abstract**

This article investigates the hypothesis that parents, who have some knowledge of and control over English skills, do significantly contribute to their child's acquiring the language skills in that language.. The article has relevance only to the environment where English is not the mother tongue of the learner but is taught as a second or foreign language. The paper presents a case study, observing the simple techniques adopted by the parents of a family in Chennai to inspire, motivate and create passion for English in their child.

**Key words:** Acquisition of language skills, hypothesis, English as a Foreign Language or EFL.

**Introduction**

Education is a joint-venture; it is more than filling the mental boxes of learners with bits of information from which knowledge is acquired. In imparting knowledge and skills to the young learners, who will make use of what they have learned to make a decent living, to lead a purposeful life and to contribute to the progress of their nation, teachers and parents have equal and shared responsibility. Teachers and parents are partners.

Balakrishna Joshi (1981) writes:

Parents are the first teachers even as teachers are the second parents... The foundation of knowledge, the skills and the attitudes which children display in later life, is laid in the impressionable period in the home, which is a world in itself, providing varied and numerous opportunities for learning through observation, suggestion and influence... (pp. 166-7)

### **Parents' Contribution to the Acquisition of Language Skills in English**

The mother is the first teacher of language to her child. The child listens keenly to the sounds and words that the mother produces and utters. As the child grows, he or she listens to the mother, the father and others at home. As far as the mother tongue is considered, the child learner, more often than not, catches what she speaks, retains it, and then reproduces it effortlessly.

When it comes to learning English, the child born to parents who have some knowledge or acquaintance with this language has more advantages than the child born to parents who have no skills in English. These parents, who have some control over English, first provide the necessary environment for learning English and also for acquiring the language skills.

### **A Normal Tradition of Using English at Home**

It has become a normal tradition now that parents who know English focus their attention and direct their time and energy towards making their child learn English, and help their children acquire the necessary skills in it. Here also if parents speak in English, the child is likely to catch it easily. In many Indian families which have some knowledge of English, it has become very normal and fashionable to speak in English. It cannot be denied that one gets much respect in India when one speaks in English, despite the fact that the language of immediate external environment itself is more than sufficient for easy communication.

### **Researchers on the Role of Parents in Child Language Development**

Bonnici Lisa in her paper titled, "Parent's Role in Child Language Development in the Home Domain" asserts that the children acquire a large percentage of their language from their parents and that the child's future proficiency in a language is largely dependent on the environment created by the parents. In other words, the parental contribution is vital in shaping the language skills of the child: "The type of language a child is exposed to in the home domain is a critical factor in determining the child's proficiency in the language." (Bonnici Lisa, Abstract, 2002)

Another report on parental involvement states: "It is well established that parental involvement is important to children's learning. This Canadian study aimed to build on earlier research which

highlighted the effectiveness of parental involvement in helping children read. Specifically the researchers set out to track the effects of two specific types of middle and upper middle class parental help on the development of their children's reading skills: story book reading and informal teaching of print. The researchers followed the progress in reading of 168 children, from age four until age nine years. Parents completed questionnaires about their child's literacy experiences at home and children's reading skills were assessed at school. The researchers found that two types of pre-school parental involvement helped their children a long learning 'pathways' in which they developed reading skills and which at a later stage directly or indirectly helped them become fluent readers. These findings help increase our understanding of the reasons why and in what specific ways parental involvement can be important for literacy development." (Sanachal, M. and Lefevre. J, Introduction)

If parents evince keen interest, then the 'cultivation' of the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing becomes possible even at home. In the case of acquisition of skills in a foreign tongue such as English, the parents can, doubtless, provide the necessary inspiration and motivation.

### **Help Through Electronic Devices**

At present, electronic gadgets such as the TV and the DVD have come in handy to parents to provide inspiration and motivation to their children, provided the parents know how to use the gadgets optimally for the desired purpose. If parents have some mastery over English language skills, the use of gadgets adds more practicing opportunities to children to acquire skills in English language. They may listen to parents who tell them interesting stories in English or read stories for them. They watch visuals and hear a lot in the programmes offered by channels meant for children. As they grow older, the children are provided with books they want from their caring parents and are also given help regularly. They are often taken to big bookstores and libraries. These things are easily done in large and medium cities.

There are parents who spend a lot of time on teaching their children read and write English. They find time for their children and with determination make efforts and take pains to help their children gradually acquire the skills such as reading and writing by helping them do their homework or tasks set by the teachers of English at school.

### **Role of Mothers**

The parents - more often mothers than fathers - do help their children in language learning. As the *Education Monitor* asserts, "There are two people who play a significant role in a child's life – the mother and the father." (Editorial, p.1) Mothers supplement the efforts of teachers at school and contribute significantly to the acquisition of at least two skills, namely, reading and writing – the former being passive and the latter productive.

### **The Case Study**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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Parental Contribution to the Acquisition of Language Skills – A Case Study

The paper aims at proving the hypothesis that parents do significantly contribute to the acquisition of skills in the English language by devising their own methods.

This paper presents the actual facts learned through observation of the efforts put in by the parents who happen to be my friend and neighbour.

The case I chose for my study happens to be my neighbour. Our close friendship and the good relationship we maintained helped me a lot to observe the parents' methodology of teaching language skills in an informal way, from close quarters.

Parents' effort to teach English language skills began when the child was just two years old. Even before the boy was put in a play school, the parents made the child listen to their reading Tirukkural (a Tamil ancient didactic work on ethics, morals and day-to-day living) and found to their surprise that the boy could easily reproduce the words and verses without difficulty. By the time he went to the play school, he had learnt about 10 'Kurals' (couplets) and surprised the Principal of the school by reciting those 'Kurals' and giving the names of different cars and such other items. The Principal told them that she had doubted the child's ability to talk, when he was brought in.

At home, the child could make beautiful figures using matchsticks to the surprise of his parents. The parents' keen interest and their careful observation of this helped them identify the child's talent early. The parents' guidance helped the boy learn by heart the 14 lined poem 'Be the Best' by Douglas Mallock and recite the same, within an hour. It was not a surprise when the boy won the poetry reciting competition held at his school.

The parents then desired that the boy should first get into the habit of reading some good material in English and to learn to write side by side. The parents were aware that children first imitate their parents. They just let the boy watch his parents reading newspapers, books, etc. Please note that the parents never told the boy to read. They started telling the boy about something interesting that they read and showed him some pictures to satisfy his curiosity. This prompted the child to ask for books. The parents carefully selected books such as 'Musical Donkey', 'Why are Tigers Striped?', 'Why are Flowers beautiful?' and books on 'Senses', 'Robots', 'Greatest Disasters', 'Snakes' and 'Trees,' etc.

The parents just put these books on the table so that the child could pick and choose one and read.

To the surprise of the parents, the boy started reading those books with great interest and copied the parents' style of reading silently! When the parents saw the boy reading, they gave him necessary assistance in reading, in pronouncing words and in giving meanings of what he was reading. Slowly the parents taught the boy how to write about what he had read or heard.

The parents taught writing by adopting some of the methods. The mother assisted the boy to write his thoughts in short sentences and she used the translation method. She discussed simple topics with the boy in his mother tongue, Tamil in this case. She asked simple questions and tried to elicit answers to those questions. Then she would ask the boy to write down those points one below the other. The mother also assisted the boy to write his thoughts in short sentences and she used the translation method. She then helped him write short essays on topics such as ‘My mother’, ‘My teacher’, ‘My school’ etc., First the boy was asked to explain what he felt about these headings in Tamil and then in English. Of course, the mother’s guidance was constantly there. She herself explained everything to me when I informally interviewed her with regard to my case study.

The boy was in the groove. He was never chided but was always guided with encouraging words, the boy’s parent declared. At the age of 10, the boy was reading and writing in English on his own and found to have developed a liking for reading story books and writing on them. And whenever he wrote, he wrote about the story, the likes and dislikes in the story and to the astonishment of the parents, he wrote the critical comments on the story. The parents also knew that some organizations encouraged children to write pieces in English such as short reviews on the story books children choose to read. The parents gave the boy a few samples of reviews and told him how to write simple reviews. The boy made sincere attempts and was never chided nor discouraged when he made mistakes in spelling and grammar. He was always appreciated. This guidance helped the boy write better.

Today the boy is 12 years old and is in Standard VIII at school. He has so far written short reviews in the prescribed format for more than 25 books and has read more than 100 books, mostly fiction. Now the boy reads newspapers and magazines and evinces keen interest in discussing certain current events. The parents have got him copies of the entire series of J.K. Rowling’s **Harry Potter** which the boy finished reading with keen interest. They also got videos, which also the boy watched with interest.

The parents also have found out that the boy reads and comprehends fast. Today the boy reads 100 pages minimum in one sitting! They also found out that when he is not disturbed or if his attention is not distracted he reads and completes the book at a stretch! He now has got an unquenchable thirst for reading fiction in particular. He has also completed reading the best sellers like *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach, and *The Alchemist* by Paul Coelho and wants his parents to get him more such books. *The Great Speeches* by R.K. Pruthi, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, *The Story of Swimming* by K.R. Wadhwaney and *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown are added to his reading list now.

Another important thing they did was to keep the TV- the so called Idiot Box- switched off whenever the boy was reading or writing in order to ensure that his attention was not distracted. They really made their boy happy by not letting him sit glued to the Idiot Box and preventing him from becoming an addict. They also did not want to watch the TV especially in the evenings. Perhaps they knew about the research findings of Prof. John Robinson at the University of Maryland (U.S). Roni Caryn Rabin quotes him in *New York Times News Service*

as saying “TV was the one activity that shared a negative relationship. Unhappy people did it more, and happy people did it less” (The *Hindu*, Sunday, Nov 23, 2008).

The observations made by Friedman in his write up titled ‘Finding the next generation of teachers’ also merit mention here: “... but if we want better teachers we also need better parents – parents who turn off the TV and video games, make sure homework is completed, encourage reading and elevate learning as the most important life skill. The more we demand from teachers the more we have to demand from students and parents...” (p.10) Nonetheless, the parents also know that TV also provided what is now-a-days called ‘Edutainment’. They made the boy watch with them channels such as BBC, Discovery, Animal Planet, NDTV, etc., and motivated him to discuss with them what he watched.

Because of the parents’ encouragement and motivation, the boy could participate in review writing competitions and win prizes. Now the boy needs only a little prodding. With reasonable pride, the parents, particularly the mother, told me that the boy once had a chance to chat online with the American writer Oliver Jeffer after reading one of the latter’s books and participating in a drawing competition relating to the theme of the book.

Now the boy has learnt to tell stories to audiences through the PowerPoint presentation technique creating alien characters and names. Recently he presented “Vimator,” his own short story. A poem titled ‘My Moments’ penned by the boy when he was in in Standard VI (10 years old) is now available in the Internet.

## **Conclusion**

This is the story of an Indian parent that achieved very impressive success in making her son acquire the basic skills of reading and writing English that has also enabled him to learn the skill of speaking in English. Does not this story remind us of Bacon’s placing the Reading skill above other skills – “Reading maketh a full man; Conference a ready man; and Writing an exact man”?

We have heard about great leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and C. N. Annadurai being voracious readers. No doubt their effective communication skills were further aided by their reading. This is what was precisely summed up by Dianna Booher, CEO, Booher Consultant, Communications Training firm when she writes, “Leaders are readers.” (Dianna Booher, p. 33, n.d.)

Although one may point out that the subjects of this study (the parents and the child) seem to be an unusually and extraordinarily motivated group and that they seem to have all the financial, and instructional resources and that their home and family atmosphere is a great starting advantage not easily available to many other parents and families, still I hope my case study proves my hypothesis that parental guidance helps lay a strong foundation in the process of helping a child acquire the basic language skills. It also proves that parents (those who have some knowledge of English) do or can contribute a lot to the child’s learning a language other



than his or her mother tongue such as English. This contribution makes the work of teachers more effective at school.

N. C. Sridharan and Radha Sridharan share their experience with *The Hindu Education Plus* on how the family background is vital to children's education. They planned to start a CBSE school in Tiruvallur (Tamil Nadu, India) in 1996 but soon transformed it into a Parent Education Programme. They declare:

Every parent wanted their child to study and do well in life. But they don't know how to do it. Many parents still believe that the schools should take the total responsibility for their ward's(sic) education.... We realized that our issue was not to teach the children, but to give them the right environment and upbringing in their houses. We decided to shift our focus from the children in the school to the parents in their homes... The objective of this 'Parental Education' is to educate the parents on their role as responsible role models to mentor their children, so that they imbibe a rich and healthy mindset.... We also explained the issues faced by parents such as how to make children speak in English, how to develop the reading habit in children." (Editor, *The Hindu*, 2008)

Let me conclude stating a fact: parents are the first teachers even as teachers are the second parents.

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