

“What Do You Like in English Class?” “I like Playing Games:” Children’s Experiences and Voices toward Learning English in a Partial English Immersion Program

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Abstract: The intentions of this study were to examine Taiwanese children’s voices and experiences of learning English at a younger age because their perspectives are largely ignored in the discourse of policy making process. Adopting the principles of Carspecken’s critical ethnography methodology, primary data in this study were collected from 17 children in the classroom of the partial English immersion program, employing methods that encompassed (1) observations of the students’ responses to English instruction, (2) interviews with the children, (3) the children’s drawings that illustrate their classroom experience. The results showed that the children are capable to provide important information about their English class and they also gave vivid accounts about their perceptions of English class, learning process, enjoyment of class, the images of their teachers and motivations of English learning. Applications and implementations were provided.

Keywords: English learning, children’s voices, early childhood education

Introduction

Within recent years, there is a strong push to require students and citizens to learn English in Taiwan, where many people see English as a significant vehicle for achieving global competence and becoming an internationalized country, especially after Taiwan has become a member of World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2003. Along with the trend of English fever, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan announced that the appropriate age for learning English should be lowered from fifth grade to third grade by 2003 and all Taiwanese citizens are encouraged to advance their English proficiency. Due to the advocacy of learning English, English education has become prevalent in many private kindergartens and preschools; as a result the, age for learning English has been lowered dramatically to preschoolers. Research (Organization of Children Welfare, 2002) indicated that at least 60% of Taiwanese young children learn English before elementary school. Needless to say, English has become the most popular foreign language taught in Taiwan.

Although learning English seems to become a national movement in Taiwan, different reference groups, including the Ministry of Education, scholars, parents and proprietors of early childhood institutes, hold contradict perspectives and concerns toward early childhood English language education. Specifically, scholars argued that learning English at a younger age is unnecessary and inappropriate. They were concerned about the development of children’s first language, identity, the quality of English teachers’ classroom performances

and efficiency of learning English (Chang, Chang, Yan, 2001; Chen, 2001; Hsu, 2001). Thus, the Ministry of Education decided that English language instruction should not be taught as a single subject in all preschools and kindergartens. English learning can only be integrated into daily learning activities. However, such policy has caused huge reaction from parents and proprietors because the former believed that English matters to their children's future career and competence (Chen, 2002; Chou, 2004; Organization of Children Welfare, 2002) while the latter cared about the potential profits of offering English language instruction ("No English Language Education," 2004; Tsai, 2001).

It looks like tremendous energy and time have been spent to contest what is meant by "appropriate" early childhood English language education from adults' positions. Regardless the dialogues and different positions among the government, scholars, parents and proprietors, it is a pity that Taiwanese children's voices and interests have never been taken into account in the discourses of the appropriateness and quality of early childhood English language education. In fact, great attention has paid to listen to children's voices in childhood research over the past decade, not only because their perspectives were ignored previously in educational discourses (Cook-Sather, 2002; Haney, Russell, & Bebell, 2004), but also there is a trend to incorporate their standpoint in policy making (Barker & Weller, 2003; Taylor, 2000). Thus, in order to understand children's experiences and perceptions of learning English and inform policy-making decisions and classroom practices, this study intended to give them a voice by inquiring into what they liked and disliked English class, how they learned English, how they responded English instruction, how they perceive their English teachers and early childhood teachers, and how they overcame difficulties in terms of learning English.

Research Methodology

Data were collected in a classroom of the partial English immersion program, where English was used as the primary instructional language in morning while Mandarin was used in afternoon. In the class, one native English speaking teacher, Sun, who only appeared in morning English learning activities, and two Taiwanese ECE teacher worked with 26 children aged between 4 and 6. Data gathered from the children included three innovative methods frequently used in studies of young children: observations, interviews, and drawings.

Data collection took place in an intensive process conducted from mid-April to mid-June, 2004. I irregularly visited the classroom two to three days a week and a total of nineteen lessons were observed. As suggested by Garbarino and Stott (1992), the data collection began with systematical observations of children's behavior rather than by eliciting oral statements because children "communicate through their behavior even more powerfully than through their words" (p. 136). Thus, in the initial period of the research process, child observation was conducted in order to understand their enjoyment, engagement and response in learning

English. During the initial observation phase of the study, I situated myself as a passive participant (Spradley, 1980), sitting back and watching children's behaviors. In order to build a trusting relationship with them, I also engaged in a moderate level of classroom participation (Spradley, 1980) including chatting, putting on dress-up clothes, and in general playing with them. The children became familiar with my presence.

In addition to observations, asking the children themselves about their perception of learning English was the most straightforward method of gaining information about the process (Clark & Moss, 2005) and therefore I considered the most direct method of documenting their perspectives was to ask them directly. Two interview strategies were implemented. First of all, the children's ideas and rights were respected. All interviews were conducted during the children's free play or outdoor play time in order to avoid interpreting the formal class schedule. I politely asked them if they would like to share their experience in learning English and they had the right to consent or reject my invitation, or even to withdraw the interview process itself (Brooker, 2001). The interview questions were "open-ended" (Barker, 1990, p. 2): a general discussion topic was initiated, and the remainder of conversation was guided by the child's interests and responses. The children were encouraged to "talk freely" (Brooker, 2001, p. 165) about the interview questions and were thus acknowledged as "experts" in their own lives, as proposed by Einarsdottier (2005). All in all, 17 out of 26 children in the selected classroom were interviewed and the duration of each interview was usually lasted fewer than 15 minutes. Secondly, the format of these interviews was flexible. One to one or small group interviews (see Brooker, 2001; Graue & Walsh, 1995) were both implemented, depending on the children's preference.

Children's drawing is considered a significant means developed to engage them in research. According to Weber and Mitchell (1995), children's drawing is "a natural form of symbolic expression" (p. 35). It encourages children to convey their thoughts freely and may even supplant their verbal expressions (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Young & Barrett, 2001). In addition, drawing is a familiar activity to most preschool age children (Punch, 2002), and therefore I purposely selected this technique to investigate their perceptions of English learning. They were asked to draw a picture about their English class and also draw the images of their English teacher and ECE teachers. . To ensure that I had the appropriate interpretations of the children's drawings, or understand the meanings of their drawings, the children were asked to describe their drawings to me. These narratives were recorded next to the drawings (Barker & Weller, 2003). It is important to note that drawing was adopted as a means of helping me understand the children's perception of their English instruction, not as a measurement of their development. After all types of data were collected, they were analyzed through Carspecken's (1996) hermeneutic-reconstructive methods. Such analysis is view as a "hermeneutic process" because interpreters are mentally engaged in the occurrences from the first, second, and third person position through intersubjective communication in

order to articulate explicit and implicit meaning fields. The approach is also “reconstructive” because researchers linguistically articulate and reconstruct the hidden cultural meanings and factors underlying the participants’ awareness.

Results

All of the children in the selected classroom had varied experiences in learning English. Some started to learn English at earlier ages and had an advanced level of understanding, while some new students were just beginners in learning English. The detailed results will be presented according to different themes.

Children’s Response and Performances in English Class

In the English class, the children usually responded to Sun’s instruction by playing different roles. Regarding classroom behaviors, most children acted as *obedient followers* who simply observed Sun’s directions and cooperated with her teaching. Although a few children occasionally acted as *rule breakers* by playing and talking with peers which was not allowed during English lessons, they quickly deferred to Sun’s authority and rarely challenged her role.

In terms of engagement levels of class participation, some children acted as *eager participants* who were enthusiastic to share their personal insights in group discussion, answer Sun’s questions, and call out responses for game playing without being solicited or recognized by the teacher. These conspicuous actions made them easily noticed by observers. Some children performed *silent students* whose responses were opposite of the enthusiasm of eager participants. These students usually remained quiet in group discussion, where they did not strive for opportunities to speak, nor did they disturb the classroom order. However, their silence and well-mannered performance may have resulted in Sun’s initial lack of attention to their learning abilities or deficiencies. In addition to the two types of roles, some children was as *bored spectators* who withdrew themselves from engagement with tasks, obvious by behaviors such as looking around the classroom, watching others’ playing, and leaning back in their chairs. It should be noted, however, that these passive behaviors involuntarily occurred during Sun’s one-on-one teaching instructions. For example, when one child was called out to practice speaking English through games, the rest of the children were to remain at their seats idly and wait for their turn. Their posture appeared to be saying, “When will my turn be coming? I have nothing to do here.”

Initial Experience of Learning English

Encountering challenges in comprehending English instruction was a common experience to the children. Many children shared similar reactions toward this difficulty. For example, they stated, “Learning English is not easy. I didn’t know English at all when I was younger”, “I did not understand English at all in the beginning”, and “[Learning English] is a little bit

difficult in the beginning”. In addition, one child described her fear of Sun, “I was afraid of [teacher Sun] when I saw her at the first time, because I’ve never seen her before”. For these children who had never learned English prior to preschool education, exposure to a foreign language teacher and a different language was not a pleasant experience.

What Children Did in English Class

One question I was interested in was how the children perceived what they did in English class. Their drawings and descriptions of classroom activities generally covered different types of English learning activities, including games, story telling, singing, receiving English lessons, and doing experiments in a theme-based English class. Among these, playing games (see Figure 1) was frequently mentioned by the children, who characterized their experience positively, saying they were “having fun” while learning. The children’s drawings also revealed that they were always aware of normative regulations in class as Dupree, Bertram and Pascal (2001) reported. Specifically, the children’s perceptions of the classroom rules focused on appropriate social behaviors and language usage. The norms of proper classroom behaviors that the children were taught to observe included raising hands before talking, sitting properly in class, not talking while the teaching is speaking, and concentrating on class activities. Regarding the children’s drawings representing features of classroom regulations, several children enlarged the size of a raising hand in their pictures (see Figure 2), which implicitly conveyed that they knew they were expected to raise their hands and remain silent until called on by the teacher if they had some thoughts to share in class. In addition, sitting in an orderly manner on chairs in rows was another trait depicted in the children’s drawings (see Figure 3). Indeed, the teachers continually reminded them that sitting still and raising hands before speaking were important.

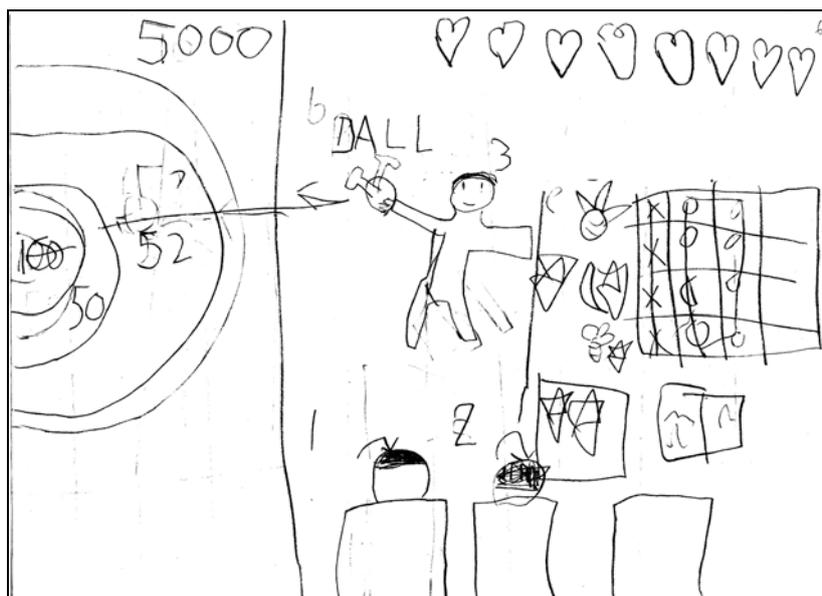


Figure 1. The class is playing a game called “Sticky Ball.” The child who correctly answers Sun’s question would be able to throw the sticky ball to the target and get points.

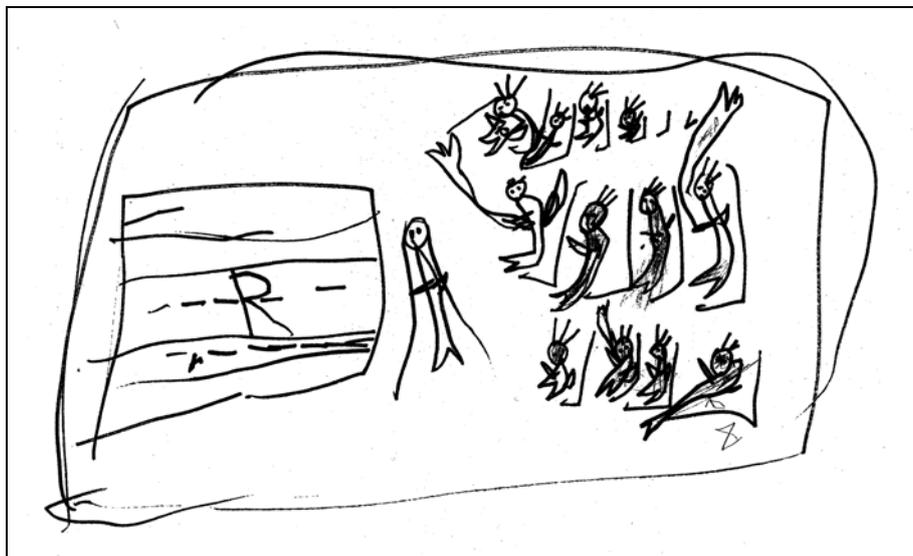


Figure 2. Children should raise their hands before speaking.

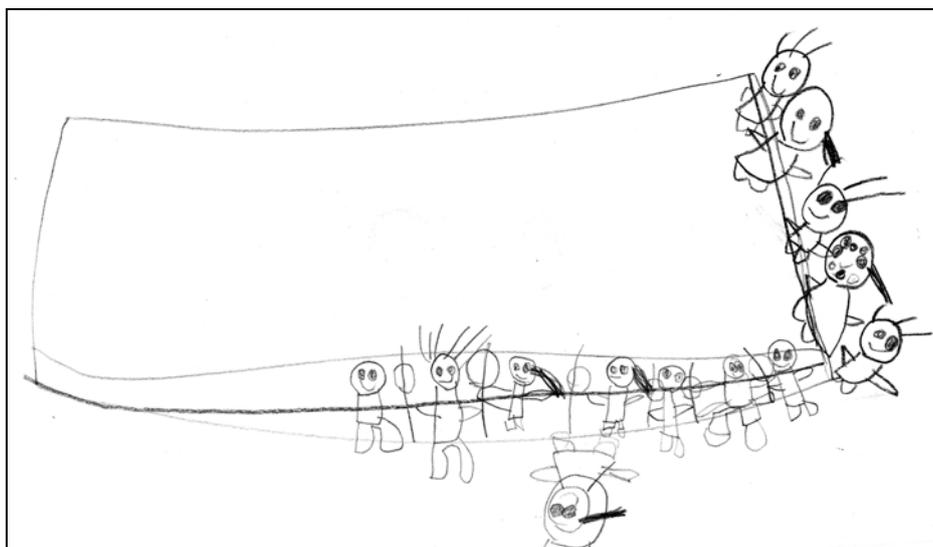


Figure 3. The children are taking English class, and they should sit in an orderly row.

How English Were Learned

The next question I was interested in addressing the children’s views on how English was learned. When interviewed about this, the children’s answers varied, but the children acknowledged that Sun was their primary English instructor. A typical given answer was “Teacher Sun teaches us how to learn English.” Some children went into more detailed explanations of Sun’s teaching principles, such as “The teacher teaches you simple English first, and then she teaches you harder English” and “[Teacher Sun] starts with speaking easy

English, and then harder English, and then the hardest English.” In other words, the children recognized that English instruction was delivered through a continuous sequence: speaking easier English is appropriate to beginning learners, and a teacher could always multiply the lesson content after students’ English improved. Another principle noticed by one child was teaching by mechanical conversations, “Teacher Sun asks questions and the children answer questions.” This feedback reflects one of Sun’s principles, teaching through drills, which emphasized repeated practices of grammatical structures.

How the Children Resolve Difficulties in Learning English

The children specified that entirely understanding English was an obstacle in the beginning stage, but they recognized that they could always turn to the ECE teachers when they did not know how to express their ideas in English or did not understand Sun’s instruction. The children depicted their trust toward the ECE teachers as follows:

John: You may speak Chinese to teacher Karen and Kate, and they will explain it to you.

Paul: You may ask the teacher Kate, and she tells me in English.

Anne: I can ask teacher Karen.

The above descriptions exemplified that the ECE teachers played an essential role in assisting the children’s listening comprehension and oral expressions.

The Usage of Mandarin and English

The children were able to distinguish the appropriate and inappropriate conditions for using English and Mandarin and explain the reason. Based on the children’s interview data, they knew two circumstances were appropriate for speaking Chinese. One child said, “Don’t worry about your English. You may speak Chinese first,” which implied that the children were allowed to use their first language, Chinese, as a means of communication if they could not speak English well. Another child mentioned, “You may speak Chinese in the afternoon because teacher Sun is gone,” which signified that English and Chinese lessons were differentiated by the presence of Sun, and speaking Chinese was acceptable only when the English teacher was absent. Therefore, speaking Chinese in morning English lessons was still conditional, and the children, indubitably recognized that using English was more appropriate than Chinese at this situation. Another reason that the children were conscious of the rule of speaking English was Sun’s limited Chinese proficiency. Some children explained, “Teacher Sun can’t speak Chinese,” “Teacher Sun needs us to speak English,” and “Teacher Sun doesn’t understand Chinese.” As a result, in order to communicate with Sun and let her know their thoughts, the children had to use the English, Sun’s language. Their response also authentically reflects Sun’s teaching practice that there is no strict “No Chinese” policy in the classroom.

Difficulties in Learning English and Chinese

When the children were asked to tell which language (English or Chinese) was more difficult to learn, English was the more frequent response. The reasons given included: speaking English is difficult, writing Chinese is easier than English, and Chinese people know Chinese better. Tiffany explained she knew how to write her Chinese name and other Chinese characters, but there are many English words she did not know how to write. To Jane, being Chinese was a privilege that allowed her to know Chinese better. She said, “We are not foreigners. We are Chinese. I know the language that Chinese people use better.” In some cases, the children felt that learning Chinese was harder. Albert elucidated that learning Chinese phonetics is not easy and he was unsure he could “do them correctly.” Nina also showed her impatience and frustration in learning how to write her Chinese name. This implies that learning English at an earlier age and flouting the development of Mandarin may result in children’s negative reactions toward their first language.

Enjoyment of English Class

The children were also asked if they liked English lessons. The majority of the children said they liked the English class because they liked the English teacher and the English class was “lots of fun.” Their favorite activity was playing games, but they also enjoyed playing with the English teacher, writing letter books, doing theme-based curriculum, and dancing. Conversely, there were also some complaints about English lessons. For instance, Jane did not like the “*Ghost*” game, because she could not win the game. Kevin grumbled that he did not have time to play blocks; he had too much to write. “English class is too long,” he complained, and there is nothing to do in the classroom. Roman elaborated: “It’s boring to sit in the classroom. I just sit there blankly and play some games, [or] I just watch others playing.”

Compared to the above interview question, the children had very different opinions about their favorite activities in school in general. The most popular answers to this question included playing on the playground, playing in the learning centers, story time, reading, drawing, creating things, and Chinese class, whereas only two children mentioned English class as a favorite activity. Although most children did not show strong negative reactions toward English class, and Sun attempted to provide interesting English instruction, the children still preferred unstructured play, which was consistent with other studies (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001; Wiltz & Klein, 2001).

Reasons for Learning English

The frequent responses to the question, “Why do you need to learn English?” were to meet the expectations and decisions of parents. Such response showed that parents were the power holders who know what the most “appropriate” education is for their children according to their philosophies and expectations. Ray and Peter explained that they learned English because “my mother makes me learn English.” Likewise, Tiffany was responsible for

fulfilling the expectations of her parents because “my parents want me to be excellent. My English should be great.”

The children also discerned a necessity to study English in order to communicate with foreigners who do not understand Mandarin. Some exemplar reactions included: “So you are able to talk to teacher Sun.” “You know how to write English, so English people will understand,” and “I will know how to speak English when I grow up and visit overseas. I won’t have to ask others how to speak English.” The children had recognized that they were living in a world with people who do not speak Mandarin, many of whom only speak English. In this case the English language becomes the sole means for the children to converse and be understood.

In addition, the children had varied personal motivations to learn English. For example, Paul and Joseph held fantastic thoughts about the magic power of English, and they stated that “learning English makes me smart.” Preparing successful elementary schooling was critical to John. He explained, “My mother told me that I will have exams and English class in elementary school... So, you know English when you go to elementary school.” Again, parents had absolute influence on their children’s sense of needed language skills. Several children indicated that they had no choice but to learn English because this school offered English lessons. Instead of being driven by personal motivation, the children learned English simply due to the environmental force.

The Differences between the English and Early Childhood Teachers

The fact that Sun and the two ECE teachers were not alike was recognized in the children’s interviews and drawings. The most distinct differences between the teachers were their working schedules and tasks. Many children pointed out that Sun only worked in the morning, while the ECE teachers stayed with them all day long. They played games with Sun, but not with the ECE teachers in the afternoon Chinese class. The primary duty of Sun was to teach English whereas the ECE teachers’ tasks included writing school-home communication books and classroom journals, taking care of the children, taking pictures, watching English class, going out for meetings, preparing food, cleaning the classroom as well as sending the children home. In addition, some children paid attention to Sun’s other attributes which were different from the ECE teachers. For example, her hands and body are white, her hair is very long, and she is a foreigner. Mark added, “Teacher Sun doesn’t live here [Taiwan]. She lives in another place. She comes here to teach English.”

The children’s drawings on what their teachers do in classroom also reflected different perceptions toward the English and ECE teachers. The most conspicuous features of Sun were her teaching status that included writing on a white board, long hair, smiling face, and wide-open mouth (she is speaking English). The children’s drawings of the ECE teachers

primarily presented different physical appearances and diverse job tasks. Figure 4, 5, 6, and 7 are typical examples of their drawings on these teachers. The results corresponded to the study of Dupree, Bertram, and Pascal (2001) that children at very young ages are able to perceive different roles and the attributes attached to these roles.

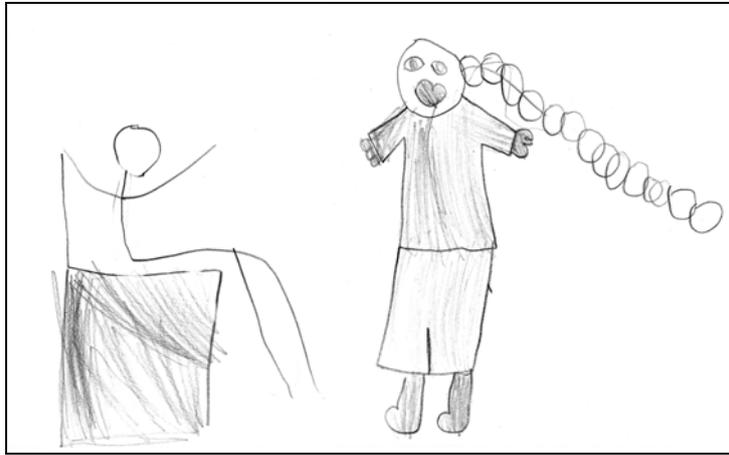


Figure 4. *Teacher Sun is giving an English lesson. She mouth opens widely because she is speaking English.*

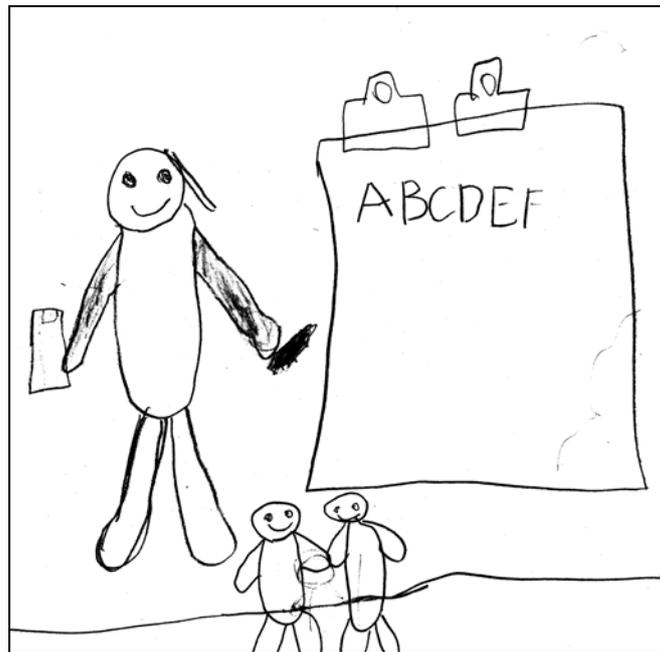


Figure 5. *Teacher Sun is giving an English lesson. She has a marker in her hand and writes down English letters on the white board.*



Figure 6. Teacher Kate sweeps the floor.

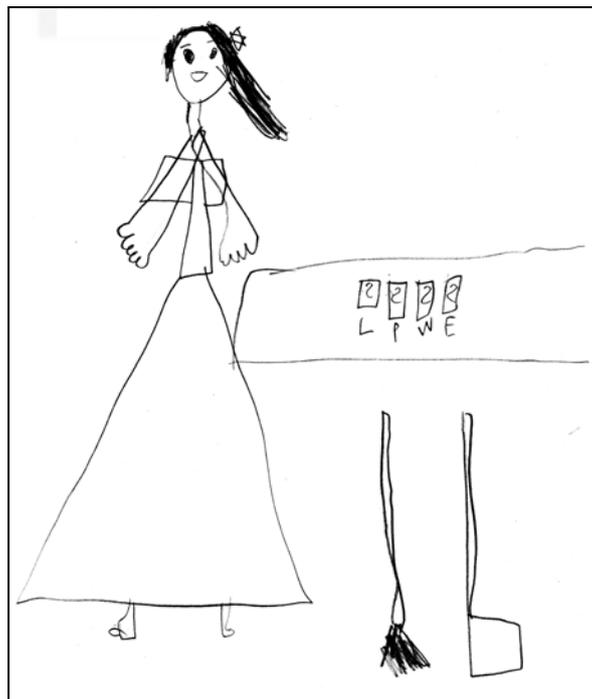


Figure 7. Teacher Karen has to write school-home communication books and clean up the classroom.

Discussion, Implementations and Applications

The results in this study provide vivid accounts of how the children in the partial English immersion programs perceived their experience of English learning. Through the

observations, interviews and drawings, the children were able to present critical, valuable information about their English classes, as noted by Einarsdottier (2005) that they were the “experts” in their lives. Their likes, dislikes, and experiences in English class should be heard and have much to contribute to the curriculum decision making process (Langsted, 1994).

Children’s health, growth and balanced development in all domains must be upheld. The partial English program aimed to balance the development of English and Mandarin learning. However, in actual classroom practices, some children did complain that English class allowed them no time for playing, it was boring, and the class was too long. Actually, the children in this study indicated that free play was their favorite activity. It seemed that the children were able to make clear distinctions between what they had to learn and what they wanted to play, confirmed by Wing’s (1995) study of children’s perceptions about work and play. Therefore, free play activities must not be sacrificed while children are expected to develop additional skills because these were considered critical and beneficial to children’s general development (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Saracho & Spodek, 2002). Despite this, some children also complained about difficulty writing Mandarin. The critical lesson here may be that programs need to sincerely value children balanced development in all areas holistically, rather than simply emphasizing English language education. Ample Mandarin learning experiences such as reading out loud, storybook listening, writing about pictures or books, or discussion as recommended by Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999), along with outdoor exercises, as well as free-play and other activities should be incorporated into daily schedules.

What children like about English class may provide wonderful insight for helping us determine the appropriateness of receiving English instruction at an early age and the “best” way to teach English. Because the children in this study reported they liked the English class that incorporated games, the proponents of early childhood English language education might therefore argue that such approach is suitable for early introduction of English language education and teaching English. However, Klein (2001) reminded us that such conclusions can be dangerous because what children enjoy in school is not always appropriate or efficient. They may have just enjoyed the process they created for themselves and it may not have resulted in the learning of English.

Adults acted as a critical role in determining the way to educate children. It was noteworthy that the children learning English were mostly motivated by external or market forces. For example, they believed English was the only means for communication with foreigners in the United States. Besides, it is the subject they would have to take in the elementary school, and therefore it would be better to prepare for it at an earlier stage. Additional relevant information also showed that how the children learned English was controlled by the English teacher who determined the teaching materials, content of learning

and the process. With respect to what and how the children should learn under the constraints of their parents and teachers, the analysis results apparently conflicted with contemporary doctrines of upholding children in the center of curricula (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Chung & Walsh, 2000). These guidelines were not being applied in the selected classroom. By contrast, the vulnerable and powerless quality of children in relation to adults revealed in the study matches Punch's (2002) observations that children must please adults by observing and fulfilling their expectations. Their ownership of learning autonomy and empowerment grew fainter under adult domination. This is why their voices of learning English must be heard.

Learning English is a long-term process. The children confirmed that learning English was a process in which the language was learned and therefore should be taught moving from simple to difficult, and it did require additional if not extraordinary efforts to master. They did not simply "pick up" English as Krashen (1982) argued. Therefore, acquiring successful English language skills in speaking and listening cannot happen overnight. Expecting these Taiwanese children to express their thoughts fluently in a foreign language, especially one considered as difficult as English, might not be an appropriate or reasonable goal. Time and patience should be given to children to process what they have learned, and time to listen and respond, when ask questions in a foreign language as cognitivists suggested (Ariza, Morales-Jones, Yahya, & Zainuddin, 2002).

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