

A Case Study of Children's Acquisition of L2  
English: Perceptions and Involvement  
of Chinese Parents in the United States

# 儿童英语第二语言习得研究

——以在美华人家长的见解和参与为视角

胡雅莉 ● 著



苏州大学出版社  
Soochow University Press

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

As a result of global education and cultural exchange as well as the swift economic development of China, there are an increasing number of Chinese scholars and students flooding into the United States together with the immigrants. It is reported that during the year of 2004 –2005, 62,523 Chinese students [Institute of International Education (IIE), 2006a] and 17,035 Chinese scholars (IIE, 2006b) were studying or working on U. S. campuses. In the past decade, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in population of both Chinese students and scholars in the United States. During the year of 2014 –2015, the number of Chinese students has increased to 304,040, which made up 31.2% of the total international student population in the U. S., an increase of 10.8 % from the previous year (IIE, 2015a); the number of Chinese scholars has grown to 40,193, which made up 32.2% of the total international scholars population, an increase of 10.4% from the previous year (IIE, 2015b).

Just as Chinese parents who often immigrate for the sake of their children's education (Chew, 2009), many Chinese students and scholars also take their young children along to the U. S. in the hope that children will benefit from the K-12 education experience, acquire English from a naturalistic English setting and in the future become more marketable in the fast-paced, ever-changing, technological and professional global village with linguistic capital. According to the data from Student Exchange and Visitor Program (SEVP), a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) unit that tracks foreigners on student visas and the schools they attend, in November 2015, 34,578 Chinese young students were studying in primary and secondary schools in the U. S., which amounted to 52% of all international students there (Jiang, 2015).

The Chinese scholar who had witnessed great progress in his 9-year-old son's English after a year of education in the United States claimed that studying in the U. S. would lay a good foundation for his son to learn English in the future and the dramatic development in reading and speaking English as well as in the competency of communicating with native English speakers could not be otherwise achieved by his

son in the home country, where the learning setting for English was strict and less interesting (Zhang, 2015). Indeed, children's benefits have been accounted as a significant factor while scholars make decisions to study abroad. In 2015, a consultant of the United States division of Golden Orient, an overseas study consultancy in Beijing, reported that 70 to 80 percent of potential visiting scholars among their customers had children and would take children into consideration while planning for overseas study (Zhang, 2015).

Language barrier, however, undoubtedly, is always a recurrent theme at the beginning of young arrivals' stories and the acquisition of a second language can not take place easily or in a very short time. The findings from the research concerning the time for English language learners (ELLs) in English-speaking countries to attain proficiency revealed that it would take 3 to 5 years to develop oral proficiency and 4 to 7 years to develop academic English proficiency (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000) for success in an English-only curriculum.

Predictably, a child might feel depressed and frustrated in a new environment where he/she can hardly communicate with anyone in school or social activities. The isolation that results from language barrier will definitely negatively influence a child's development in psychology, intelligence, emotion and other aspects as well. Thus, how to help children acquire English effectively and adjust to the new cultural environment as soon as possible becomes a top concern of Chinese parents once they set foot on American soil.

Indeed, for many years, experts have argued about the effective strategies for children to acquire English as a second language (ESL). Many consider children can acquire or pick up English quickly while soaking up English in the mainstream classroom (as cited in Houff, 2010). Borjas (2011), however, claimed that 80 percent of a second-generation immigrant children, who had been enrolled in the U. S. schools since kindergarten, were still classified as limited English proficient even when they reached secondary school, which suggested that to some extent preschool and elementary programs in the U. S. failed to adequately address the needs of English learners. Thus, unfortunately, school effort alone does not meet the expectation of ELLs' parents regarding their children's second language acquisition (SLA).

In addition to getting children immersed in a natural English setting, other factors also affect the development of children's second language acquisition. Comprehensible input, for example, has been emphasized as one of the crucial

elements in children's acquisition of a second language. Just as Krashen (1982) suggested, in an English-speaking country:

Teacher talk is actually more valuable [than the actual grammar point]! When we "just talk" to our students, if they understand, we are not only giving a language lesson, we may be giving the best possible language lesson since we will be supplying input for acquisition. (p. 35)

Apparently, Krashen makes a good point here by highlighting the role of comprehensible input, which implies that only when children are immersed in comprehensible language settings can they soak up the input and benefit most from the rich source of language in the natural settings. Specifically, to fulfill the academic tasks in the mainstream classroom, more assistance regarding content-specific vocabulary, for instance, is of crucial significance, which can hardly be "picked up" by an English learner who has limited language proficiency.

Once we understand the needs ELL children have in acquiring English as a second language, we will begin to explore the answer to the problem. In addition to providing children with the English environment, other assistance, if available, will make up for the weakness of simple practice of language "picking up". Assisting children in accessing comprehensible input, for example, is a further step to help them succeed in SLA. Undoubtedly, as the first and primary teachers of children, parents are assumed to play an important role in their children's language adjustment, let alone Chinese parents, whose parenting stereotype in the United States was once well known as "tiger mom" (Chua, 2011), which suggested that the majority of Chinese parents were strongly motivated to get involved in their children's education.

Recent research has revealed that the home context is a crucial environment for young immigrant children's success or failure in achieving English (Li, 2006 a) and Chinese parental assistance and guidance in the child's acquisition of English as a second language could help the child quickly and successfully adjust to the grade-level mainstream class in an English-speaking country (Wei & Zhou, 2013). The findings of current research imply that Chinese parents are indeed eager to explore effective and practical strategies so as to better assist their children in moving forward step by step along with instruction from ESL instructors and teachers of mainstream classes, going through the transitional period quickly and smoothly while keeping them from potential problems, and achieving the optimal benefits of learning in an English-speaking country.

Therefore, to help more Chinese children effectively acquire English as a second language and maximize their learning experience in the United States, a case study on Chinese parents' perceptions and their involvement in children's second language acquisition intended to provide frame of references to guide parents and children encountering a similar challenge in learning in English-speaking countries will be of great value and significance.

Abundant research has been conducted in studying Chinese parents' perceptions and involvement in their children's SLA in China and engagement of immigrant parents in their children's education in English-speaking countries has also long been studied, which lay a solid foundation for the current research with a focal point on Chinese parents' perceptions and involvement in children's English SLA in the United States.

As Chinese parents, international students, visiting scholars and immigrants may hold varied beliefs, face various challenges and hence support their children's second language development in distinctive ways. The varied approaches predictably result from the difference in parents' cultural values and personal backgrounds such as economic resources, educational experience, working status, personalities, and capabilities to adapt to an entirely new environment. Therefore, a study concerning how Chinese parents perceive SLA process and their role in children's English SLA, how they make the most of available resources while residing abroad, how they make up for the lack of resources and how they overcome contextual and individual challenges in providing English acquisition opportunities for their children will be enlightening.

## **1.1 Problem Statement**

In the United States, as a result of frequent cultural exchanges and immigration from China, the children of Chinese international students, visiting scholars and immigrants have become a steadily increasing group in the K-12 education system. Understanding Chinese parental perceptions and involvement in their children's English SLA is urgent for the healthy development of children and improvement of the U. S. education system; yet study on parental perceptions and practice of Chinese parents including international students and visiting scholars has gained little attention in educational research.

The problem to be explored in this study is Chinese parents' perceptions of their children's acquisition of English as a second language and their involvement in their

children's SLA guided by their belief. How parents' perceptions shape their involvement and what strategies are adopted and preferred by parents will be explored.

The reason to focus on Chinese parents, including international students, visiting scholars and immigrants, is that the dramatic increase in this population in the U. S. demands attention to the closely related social issues. According to the report from Institute of International Education (2015a, 2015b), the number of Chinese visiting scholars and students in the United States both ranked top in the category of international students and international visiting scholars in the U. S., and current Chinese immigrants are the third-largest foreign-born group (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). Predictably, their school-aged children will comprise another dramatically growing group in the U. S. Therefore, the perceptions and involvement of Chinese parents in their children's SLA in the U. S. environment has become a significant educational issue.

Unlike early Chinese visiting scholars, international students or Asian immigrants to the United States, the recent group often comes with resources, such as financial capital, professional skills, and educational credentials. To help their children adapt to the new environment and keep up with school learning, those Chinese parents have abundantly got involved in their children's SLA with various strategies and accomplished achievement in language development in varied degrees.

As Miller and Ginsberg (1995) pointed out, learners' beliefs about the nature of language learning can have a considerable influence on their behavior by shaping the learning opportunities that arise and the learning strategies that will be adopted. Thus, though Chinese parents themselves are not the second language learners, their beliefs and assumptions can predictably impact their involvement in their young children's language learning, which leads to different learning outcomes achieved by children. As the revised Model of Parental Involvement (Walker et al. 2005) suggested, parents' perceptions and involvement in their children's education would influence students' achievement. Therefore, it is rather significant to explore Chinese parents' perceptions and engagement in their children's SLA.

Recent literature review (Butler, 2014a; Kwok, 2015; Lee, 2010) revealed that research concerning Chinese parents' perceptions and involvement in their children's English learning in China was undertaken, yet a limited amount of research has been conducted with focus on Chinese parents' perceptions and involvement in children's SLA in English-speaking countries, where quality and quantity of input and

interaction as well as available resources are distinctly different from areas in which English is not primarily used. Furthermore, the current literature concerning Chinese parents' engagement in their children's English acquisition in English-speaking countries focuses mainly on studying the practice of Chinese immigrant parents, few of which include Chinese student parents and visiting scholar parents as research participants.

As the number of Chinese students and visiting scholars in the U. S. has soared dramatically in the past ten years, a case study including them as subjects will make the research concerning Chinese parents' perceptions and involvement in their children's SLA more worthwhile and comprehensive, which will also fill the gap of current research.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

Overall, the purpose of this qualitative study is to provide an in-depth description that aims to understand and gain knowledge about Chinese parents in the U. S. and reveal what Chinese parents believe and how they support and get involved in their children's English SLA in an English-speaking country. Specifically, the purpose is threefold:

(1) To gain knowledge concerning Chinese parents' assumptions, attitudes, motivation, and goals in assisting their children's SLA.

(2) To discover varied and specific Chinese parental involvement in home-based, school-based and community-based experiences that support their children's achievement of English.

(3) To understand challenges Chinese parents encounter in their involvement as well as their practice to overcome barriers.

The objective is to gather details about parents' attitudes and strategies in assisting their children in the development of English language skills and to build a model with suggested effective strategies guiding parental assistance in their children's English SLA.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

In recent years, parental involvement in children's English SLA has become an important issue in today's Chinese education due to the significant status of English both in global communication and in Chinese education system. For Chinese international students and visiting scholars, the possibility of bringing children along

to the United States and providing them with an opportunity to acquire English as a second language in a natural setting has highly motivated them to make decisions in going abroad.

Many Chinese parents expect that a solid foundation in English will enhance children's motivation and interest in further English learning and the experience of studying in an English-speaking country will definitely broaden children's horizon and influence their habit of mind. The potential positive outcomes of the experience might be unlimited and beyond expectation. Apparently, the practice of bringing children to the United States itself could be cited as the highest level of parental involvement in their children's English SLA.

For immigrant families, Chinese is often primarily used at home before children go to preschool and then purposely used at home for convenience and for cultural maintenance as well after children start preschool; parental involvement in their children's English SLA, therefore, has also become an interesting and meaningful issue. Their perceptions and practice in supporting children's English SLA might be slightly or significantly different from those of international students and visiting scholars because of varied personal backgrounds and available resources. Hence, including immigrant parents as participants in this study will make the research more comprehensive and more instructive.

How to help children develop English effectively and obtain the optimal learning outcomes while studying in the United States interests and also confuses almost all the Chinese parents once they set foot on American soil. Though much study has been conducted related to Chinese parental involvement in children's English learning in China, little research has been done concerning Chinese parental perceptions and involvement in their children's English SLA in an English-speaking country.

This study addresses the emergent issue of assisting Chinese parents in supporting their children's English SLA in an English-speaking country through exploring insight into Chinese parents' assumptions, motivations, attitudes and goals as well as specific practice preferred or adopted by Chinese parents on the ground of their belief.

Studying the experiences of these parents will provide frame of references for Chinese parents in English-speaking countries who are eager to get involved in their children's English SLA or who are prepared to. With knowledge of factors that could possibly influence their children's SLA and potential challenges that might hinder their intended involvement in mind, Chinese parents could be better prepared while planning their engagement. The suggested practice and advocated experience will also

assist parents in choosing their preferred way of involvement. The major findings and implications of this study will also possibly benefit other ESL families as well.

This study will also inspire the educators in the United States or any other countries where English is commonly used and assist them in better addressing the needs of Chinese families as well as other ESL families, acting as more responsive facilitators and effectively guiding ELLs in their class.

Globalization and accountability have been listed as two of the five major trends in education that are profoundly changing the world ( Kilbane & Milman, 2013 ), and therefore effectively educating ELL students emerges as one of the major responsibilities of schools. The study will provide educators who encounter an increasingly diverse classroom with insight into Chinese children and Chinese parenting style. The comprehensive knowledge, cross-cultural insight and deep understanding of learners' family will undoubtedly contribute to the improvement of culturally responsive pedagogy and the design of instruction, essential to the fulfillment of the objective that "every student succeeds". The ultimate achievement in pedagogy will hopefully benefit all ELL students.

Furthermore, by studying the strategies employed by the parents, educators in China who engage in the practice or research of foreign language learning will get a new glimpse of utilizing teaching resources and cooperate with parents in more dimensions, which might help countless young English learners improve their language development.

Research on Chinese parental involvement in English SLA in an English environment will also enrich current ESL literature and supplement the theory of second language acquisition. Some of the issues in this field may motivate those who wish to explore this area in greater depth.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were as follows :

(1) What are the major factors Chinese parents believe that have contributed to their children's development in English SLA?

(2) How do Chinese parents perceive their role in their children's English SLA?

(3) What strategies and practice do Chinese parents' adopt to get involved in their children's English SLA?

(4) What are the factors that affect Chinese parents' involvement in their

children's English SLA?

## 1.5 Definition of Terms

Terms employed in this study were acknowledged to hold different meanings in varied contexts and by various readers. Thus, the following definitions were used to acquaint the readers with interpretation of those words in this research.

*Automatization*: In this study, automatization refers to the spontaneous process of activating and retrieving related elements in head while receiving appropriate input.

*Chinese parents*: In this study, Chinese parents who are participants of the research refer to Chinese immigrant parents, Chinese international student parents with F-1 visa and Chinese visiting scholar parents with J-1 visa who bring their children as dependents ( F-2, J-2 ) to the U. S. while they are studying or conducting research. The children of those participant Chinese parents are of primary school age and once attended or attend kindergarten through Grade 3 in elementary schools in the United States.

*Chinese visiting scholars*: Chinese visiting scholars with J-1 visa are selected by a Department of State designated program to participate in an exchange visitor program at universities in the U. S. for self-improvement, experience, visions, inspiration and connections. Visiting-scholar programs require no admission tests, usually with financial fund from Chinese government or institutions, encourage scientific research, and last six months to a year while charging no tuition. University professors comprise the majority of Chinese visiting scholars. Children of those visiting scholars are allowed to go along with them to the U. S. and are eligible to attend free kindergarten through Grade 12 in the local public schools in the town where they reside.

*Chinese international students*: Chinese international students with F-1 visa pursue a full program of study in a college or university in the United States that is certified to enroll international students by Student and Exchange Visitor Program ( SEVP ). They are often required to take the Academic Test in the International English Language Testing System ( IELTS ) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language ( TOEFL ) and the scores should meet the language competency requirements of the U. S. universities. Children of those F-1 students are allowed to go along with them and are eligible to attend free kindergarten through Grade 12 in the local public schools in the town where they reside.

*Culturally responsive pedagogy*: Culturally responsive pedagogy is also known as

culturally responsive teaching where particular instructional strategies are incorporated based on acknowledgement of children's cultural backgrounds and individual characteristics.

*Declarative memory*: Declarative memory refers to memories that can be consciously recalled such as facts and events (Ullman, 2004).

*English as a second language (ESL)*: ESL will be used interchangeably in this book and for the purpose of this study. ESL children live in an English-speaking country and speak English as their second language. Most of these children are newcomers to the environment and culture.

*English language learners (ELLs)*: English language learners consist mostly of children who were born outside an English-speaking country and now live in the country where English is primarily used or who were born to language-minority families that live in an English-speaking country. These children continue to use their first languages in their families. English language learners and ELLs will be used interchangeably in this book to refer to "school-age children who are proficient in their native language but not in English" (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2015, p.340).

*4-2-1 family structure*: 4-2-1 family structure refers to the family that the only child from single-child parents has; when the child grows up, he or she could have to take care of two parents and four grandparents.

*Kindergarten*: In China, the term refers to whole-day programs serving preschool children from age 3 to 6. In most states of the U. S. , children begin kindergarten at age 5 and kindergarten is now generally considered the first year of formal education and fully integrated into the school system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

*Language acquisition*: Language acquisition happens as human beings perceive, comprehend and produce languages in natural communications such as participating in a conversation, watching a video or reading a book.

*Mainstream classes*: Regular school classes.

*Native-like proficiency*: Native-like proficiency means that little or no perceptible difference exists between language performance of second language (L2) learners and that of native speakers. Generally, language production in terms of pronunciation, lexical repertoire and collocations, and recognition of connotations and allusions closely related to cultural information and experience presents evidence for determining how close L2 learners are to native-like proficiency.

*Parental perceptions*: In this study, the meaning of the term is narrowed down

and it refers exclusively to parents' understanding of literacy and language development, beliefs about what is important and necessary for their children, expectations for educational and school success, and their perspective of their position in children's second language development.

*Parental involvement*: In this study, parental involvement mainly refers to parents' involvement in their children's English SLA, which means specific support or practices that parents utilize to promote their children's English development.

*Procedural memory*: Procedural memory is a memory for how to do things. It is also known as an implicit memory, which indicates that the learning of the knowledge, and the knowledge itself, are generally not available to conscious access. Learning in the system is gradual, through repetition on an ongoing basis, until stimuli and responses happen automatically (Ullman, 2004).

*Second language (L2)*: Second language refers to the language that is acquired after the first language. Specifically, L2 typically refers to an additional language that is acquired in a context where the language is socially dominant and primarily used for education, employment and other basic needs.

*Silent period*: Silent period is a stage in second language acquisition, during which learners may not speak or produce the most minimal language. It is more observable in child English language learners (VanPatten & Benati, 2010), responding with a simple "yes" or "no" answer, nodding or gesturing.

*Socio-economic status*: Socio-economic status refers to social standing or class of an individual or group, typically measured by income, educational backgrounds, and/or occupations.

*Telegraphic speech*: Telegraphic speech is a concise message that resembles a brief telegram, characterized by the use of three-word short phrases or sentences that consist of main content words and omit function words and grammatical morphemes (Gabig, 2013).

*Tiger mother*: Coined and presented first in 2011 by Amy Chua, a Yale law professor, the term "tiger mother" refers to a strict or demanding mother in Asia who pushes her children to high levels of achievement with typical parenting methods such as making decisions and instructing their children what to do, so as to ensure the success of their children. Tiger mother in this study means an authoritarian approach to parenting.

## 1.6 Limitations

One limitation of the study, first and foremost, is that the population size was