

An Investigation into the linguistic attitude of Saudi mothers towards their child's English education (Involving Tabuk University Faculty and Administration Members)

Dr. Nadyh Naser R Alawfi

Assistant Professor at the Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Language researchers have long believed that parents with a positive attitude towards learning, and a willingness to participate in their child's academic journey, are one of the key factors involved in English language acquisition. This study is designed to explore the attitude of Saudi mothers towards their child's education and involves several faculty and administration staff employed at Tabuk university. The study will primarily focus on the attitude of the mother as, traditionally, Saudi mothers are the primary caregiver and primary educators in the home. Upon returning from school, the children will require help from the mother, as the father will be working until later in the evening. The research will consider whether factors such as household revenue, scholastic background, socioeconomic status and the mother's comprehension of the English language play a part in the child's education. The research involved fifteen Saudi mothers who were interviewed regarding their involvement in, and attitude towards, their child's education. In summary, the results revealed that all of the mothers questioned, exhibited a constructive attitude concerning their children's English language development. Other results demonstrated that there are no significant correlations between the mothers' understanding of English, household income, educational history and their attitude towards their child's learning. However, it was noticed that these variables did prevent them from helping as much as they were able.

Keywords:

attitude, English language education, Socioeconomic level.

معرفة توجهات الأمهات السعوديات اللغوية تجاه تعليم أطفالهم اللغة الإنجليزية

(مشاركة أعضاء هيئة التدريس والإداريات بجامعة تبوك)

د. نادية ناصر العوفي

أستاذ مساعد ، قسم اللغات والترجمة، كلية التربية والآداب، جامعة تبوك

ملخص البحث:

لطالما اعتقد باحثو اللغة أن الآباء الذين لديهم توجهات إيجابية تجاه التعلم، والرغبة في المشاركة في الرحلة الأكاديمية لأطفالهم، هي واحدة من العوامل الرئيسية المساعدة في اكتساب اللغة الإنجليزية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى اكتشاف توجهات الأمهات السعوديات من تعليم أطفالهن اللغة الانجليزية، ويشارك فيها العديد من أعضاء هيئة التدريس والموظفات الإداريات العاملات في جامعة تبوك. تركز هذه الدراسة على توجهات الامهات، كما هو متعارف عليه الام هي المعلمة الاولى للطفل والمهتم الاكثر للطفل حيث أنه بمجرد عودة الطفل من المدرسة الأم هي التي تهتم بأموره الأكاديميه لوجود الأب خارج المنزل للعمل حتى المساء. البحث يركز على عدة أمور أساسيه منها الدخل الاسري والخلفية الدراسية والعوامل الاقتصادية والاجتماعية للأسرة وفهم الأم واتقانها للغة الإنجليزية لما لهم جميعا من دور في العملية التعليمية للطفل. شمل البحث خمسة عشرة أم سعودية وتمت مقابلتهن فيما يتعلق بمشاركتهن في تعليم أطفالهن وموقفهن منه. باختصار، كشفت النتائج أن جميع الأمهات اللواتي تم مقابلتهن، أظهرن موقفا بناء فيما يتعلق بتطور أطفالهم في اللغة الإنجليزية. وأظهرت نتائج أخرى أنه لا توجد علاقات ذات دلالة بين فهم الأمهات للغة الإنجليزية، ودخل الأسرة، والتاريخ التعليمي، وموقفهن من تعلم أطفالهن. ومع ذلك، لوحظ أن هذه المتغيرات منعتهم من المساعدة إلى حد ما.

كلمات مفتاحية: التوجهات اللغوية، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، المستوى الاقتصادي والاجتماعي.

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is concerned with the study of how humans use language as a social event and the fundamental interaction between linguistics and humanity and it is these areas that form the basis of this research. Previous studies have tended to focus on either the social characteristics of language or the linguistic element. In contrast, this study intends to concern itself with the attitudes of the primary caregiver (in this case the mother) towards teaching English to their children, combined with the associated social variables and how these may influence the mother's mindset towards English language education.

1.1 The Importance of the English Language

For several years, English has been deemed as an international language, used globally in science and business, which has increased the number of English language speakers around the world (Crystal, 2003). However, there are still several countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that regard English as a secondary language. Despite this, English language speaking is a highly regarded skill where proficiency and fluency are paramount to success in the fields of technology, education and economics. "The power of English lies not in its first language speakers, but in the vast numbers using it as a second language" (Karmani & Peacock, 2005). The use of English as a second language is of notable significance to nations and societies seeking development and swift advancement (Yusup and Ahmad, 2016). Prior research has identified that learning to read, speak, or write English as an additional language can be an extensive and demanding process for learners of all ages, however, it has also been written that the younger the age of the learner, the easier this process becomes (Wang and Chang, 2011; Birdsong and Molis, 2001). To gain proficiency in a second language, such as English, a formal, structured education is vital: Slamento (2003) states that formal education offers learning experiences that are planned, organised and methodically focused on the needs of the child. This study will focus on the attitude of the mothers in their child's English language education.

1.2 Parental attitudes and Language Learning

In many studies, attitude is accepted as one of the foremost influences that impact language learning (Fayeke, 2010). Starks and Paltridge (1996) support this when they argue that acceptance or rejection often

relies on the attitude of the participant. In these instances, attitude, and its relation to language learning, can be categorised in many different ways. Ladegaard (2000) defines three distinct elements of attitude: knowledge, emotion, and behaviour. Each of these components consists of many recognisable features and experiments have been performed to elicit examples of language attitude. Parents are, fundamentally, at the epicentre of their children's lives. The role of the family is crucial in the promotion and development of a child's interest in learning the English language at home: a nurturing home environment will inspire the child to succeed in all areas of the curriculum. When a caregiver demonstrates a positive attitude, either active or passive, there is a measurable improvement in attainment by the child, even in families where the parents do not speak the language being learned.

Young (1994) recognises that the parental view of foreign language learning, has a clear effect on the language development of their child. The reverse is also true: when parents have a passive response to a foreign language, participating in their child's learning (at school and home) can elicit positive feelings towards the acquisition of a second language (Rosenbusch, 1987). In addition to parental attitude, Jang (2012) states that the way literacy is practised within the home and educational motivations can be influenced by other characteristics, such as the levels of parental education and income. In summary: parental attitudes toward language are an enormous influence on the views of children (Baker, 1992). Current research about parental attitudes regarding their children's language education focuses on parental preference regarding the language taught at school. Research conducted on the Hmong language (Withers, 2004), Vietnamese (Young and Tran, 1999), and minority parents (Lee, 1999) indicate that parents prefer their children to experience a bilingual education to learn English and maintain their cultural-linguistic identity. These studies imply that bilingualism amongst these groups results in a positive parental attitude towards language.

Oladejo (2006) investigated the Taiwanese policy of bilingual education and the associated parental attitudes. The results revealed that gender was not a factor in parental attitudes towards bilingual instruction. There was, however, a noticeable discrepancy between the age of the parents and their opinions regarding claims that learning a second language would negatively impact the primary language efficiency of the child. Parental income was also a factor in this research: low-income parents were less likely to agree than affluent parents. The same was true when

considering the education levels of the parents: well-educated parents expressed a more positive response than those whose education had ceased at an earlier academic level.

Li (1999) conducted a study concerning the role played by linguistic minority parents in helping their children to become bilingual. The study demonstrated that the attitude of the parent towards both cultures and both languages, combined with positive and supportive domestic exchanges, are crucial to the child's developing bilingualism and establishment of their multicultural character. It also confirms that the choice to raise a child as monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, rests solely with the parents.

1.3 Parental Attitudes and Social Variables

Heckman (2008) has identified the links between parental socioeconomic status, as indicated by the level of education achieved, occupation, and income, and the educational attainment of their children. In a subsequent study, Cansler (2008) describes how a parent's approaches to language learning and their involvement in home education, are shaped by considerations such as gender, ethnic background, linguistic heritage, social position and salary. Socioeconomic circumstances can affect living conditions and feelings of capability resulting in those with a greater income becoming more respected by the community and society as a wider whole. They may also experience higher levels of self-worth and confidence because they occupy a prestigious position of employment, have attained improved education, increased wealth and political influence (Soekanto, 2012). Students from affluent families have improved enthusiasm, attitude and drive as they have access to all of the privileges of modern life: up-to-date technology, reliable Wi-fi, personal study space, stationery supplies, educational texts, and extracurricular tutoring to develop their understanding of concepts learned at school. Jeynes (2005) states that to ensure educational success, well-educated parents are increasingly willing to go without, for the sake of their children. The opposite can be said of those families with low socioeconomic status: it will disadvantage academic achievement by denying access to necessary supplies and an increased level of domestic stress. A child in this environment may have no private study space and a greater number of family members living in one home (Majoribanks, 1996). This study

aims to examine these social variables and their effects on the language education attitudes experienced by Saudi mothers.

All parents have a variety of different educational experiences and levels of attainment which create various behaviours, attitudes, perceptions and socioeconomic statuses which subsequently contribute to their children's education in a variety of diverse ways (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Poorly educated parents can become less involved in school-based activities due to a reduced understanding of the educational system and their previous negative experiences of school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). A study conducted in 1998 (Snow et al, 1998), found that children from low-income households had reduced access and limited exposure to quality books resulting in lower literacy levels than their peers. Indeed, many parents stated their children never read books alone (National Statistical Office, 2011).

2- Research Questions

This study intends to answer the following questions:

1. What are mothers' attitudes and beliefs regarding their children's learning of English as a second language?
2. How have the mothers' attitudes and beliefs influenced the manner in which they support their children's bilingual development?
3. What factors do parents consider as being an influence on their linguistic attitudes?
4. Are there any differences between parents' knowledge of English, socioeconomic level, income and their attitude towards their children's English language education?

3-Methodology

3.1 Participants

The majority of this study is based on information regarding maternal attitudes towards children's English language education gathered from fifteen mothers employed by Tabuk university, either as faculty members or administration. The faculty members have attained either a bachelor's degree, master's or PhD. Some of the administrative workers hold a bachelor's, however, the majority of them are high school educated only. This group were chosen to investigate how maternal education attainment influences their attitude towards their child's

education. This group also allows research into how income may impact a child's education: the mothers with a higher level of education have a higher income than those who only achieved a high school education. A number of the higher qualified employees attained their award in a country where English is the primary language, and this allows investigation into how this has affected their attitude towards their child's English language education. Finally, the size of the participants' family unit exhibited variation in the number of children each one had.

3.2 Data Collection

This study uses a qualitative methodology, chosen because the main intention is to obtain descriptive profiles and information from the participants. This information was collated from a series of recorded interviews conducted in either Arabic or English, depending on the interviewee's language proficiency. It consisted of fifteen questions, presented in a loosely structured format, and lasted forty-five minutes. As previously discussed, mothers were chosen due to their increased presence in the home while the fathers were still at work and therefore interacted more often with the children.

3.3 Data Analysis

To conduct a thorough data analysis, I transcribed each interview and coded it to uncover similar content patterns using Strauss and Corbin's process (1990). All of the data was translated into English and then transcribed, along with any quotations included below. The results of these interviews contain information regarding maternal opinions towards English language learning and how these opinions may be impacted by social variables, in either a constructive or detrimental manner.

4. Findings

4.1 Research Question One: What are mothers' attitudes and beliefs regarding their children's learning of English as a second language?

4.1.1 Attitudes Towards Bilingualism

The mothers taking part in this research all expressed similarly positive thoughts regarding the teaching of the English language. They concurred that it was essential for their children to learn English for academic

reasons, effective social interaction, increased job opportunities, travel and as part of Saudi Vision 2030. Currently, Saudi Arabian society, particularly in Tabuk, has started to transform: many non-Saudi nationals have begun to settle in the area thanks to the establishment of large projects such as Neom. The arrival of Neom has attracted people from all over the globe, increasing social, cultural and linguistic diversity: there is a need for a common language and English will allow communication between locals and the newly arrived employees and their families.

Participant three said: “all is about English. I won’t let my children suffer finding a job when they grow up: learning English will open many doors for them anywhere they go, not only in Saudi Arabia but out of Saudi as well.” Participant fourteen said: “I am really happy as my children had the chance to learn English, in the UK, as I studied there for 8 years, I feel so happy when I see other people struggling to teach their children English when I am not, really I am very thankful my kids are native speakers of English.”

Participant fifteen said: “it is my dream to see my two boys speak English, it’s the language of the era, English means opportunities. Nowadays, to enjoy life, you need to be able to speak English, when going abroad, booking hotels, and ordering food when you travel, all of these need English. From the smallest point to the biggest point, English is needed everywhere, even to enjoy time playing games you need English, we need English, in our life. Life has changed a lot.”

Participant thirteen said: “honestly, yes we need English. I think speaking English becomes a lifestyle, yes...educated families teach their kids English, for me, English is a prestige, a lifestyle and could be a show off in some families but I love it.”

Participant six said: “it is important to learn English as it is the language of good universities in Saudi today, not in Saudi only but for other countries as well. If you want your children to study in USA or UK they need English. I do not want them to struggle or have difficulties when they go to university.”

English is the language of education in academic establishments such as the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) teach solely in English (Alshahrani & Al-Shehri (2012). It is a fact that most Saudi universities use English as the language of education in their science, medicine, engineering and allied health curriculum (Al-

Seghayer, 2012; Al-Shami, 1983). Participant three said: “English is the language of power! Yes, it is! Otherwise, why is it chosen to be the second language in Saudi Arabian schools and public schools?”

Al-Seghayer (2012) states: the Saudis' attitude toward the English language is highly positive. He believes that many Saudis view the English language as vital for Saudi Arabian expansion and advancement due to its prominent usage in many fields of employment and research.

4.2 Research Question Two: How have the mothers' attitudes and beliefs influenced the manner in which they support their children's bilingual development?

In Saudi Arabia, there are two ways to improve a child's English language skills: enroll them in an international school or attend an English language organisation class. Saudi Arabian schools are categorised into three groups: public, private and international. The main difference between them involves the use of English. In public and private schools, English is studied as a separate curriculum subject whereas international schools teach all subjects in English. Fees for international schools are more than private schools and require an improved income, particularly if the family consists of more than one child. Attending an international school is viewed as the optimum way to teach a child English.

Participant seven said: “Some parents cannot afford the fees, but they find an alternative way to teach English to their children. Saying that nowadays a lot of digital channels are free, a lot of free lessons on YouTube are free so why not? We can if we want. Positive attitude is the main reason to let your children get what you, and they, want.”

Participant eleven added: “it is so difficult for me to pay international school fees, but I let my children join free online classes. I know schools are different as they have a systematic system, yet we can find an alternative way as well, so why not.”

Participant thirteen said “nearly every year we travel abroad. The main reason is to let my two kids attend a summer English programme during the summer time. At the same time, they can become used to the culture as well, teaching atmosphere and language from native speakers. I am sure when they grow up, they will have more chances than others: I am getting them ready from now, this is my duty as a mum.”

Many Saudis believe that English learning is enhanced through exposure to native speakers. This is supported by Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012) who state that many people globally regard native speakers as the perfect teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This has resulted in a clear advantage for native English speakers in the form of employment discrimination: highly qualified, non-native speakers are often dismissed in favour of less qualified native English speakers.

4.3_Research Question Three: What factors do parents consider as being an influence on their linguistic attitudes?

As demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, some mothers cannot find the money for education in private or international schools, but they can find and use alternative methods to instruct their children in English. A positive attitude was a contributing factor: the desire to find alternative means of educating their children, such as the hiring of a native English-speaking tutor, is a strong motivation, particularly when siblings are involved.

Participant four supported this: “I want my children to have a good job when they grow up. To have a good CV you need to learn English. The main two things nowadays are technology and languages. My children are my life. I am working every single day, five times a week, overtime, and only one month a year off because of them. It doesn’t matter what they are warning. It doesn’t matter about travelling, but education matters. Nowadays, children with no English language means children with no education. Everything has changed around me, [this] region has a lot of changes. We started to see people from the other side of the world. We need to communicate.”

4.4 Research Question Four: Are there any differences between parents’ knowledge of English, socioeconomic level, income and their attitude towards their children’s English language education?

4.4 .1 Maternal Knowledge of English Language & Educational Background

One of the primaries aims of this study was to establish the language competency of the mothers and whether this creates an optimistic environment in the home. Five of the participants gained their PhD in a country where English is the primary language. One of them said: “now,

it's time for the Arabic language. My children speak English very well: they spent seven years in [the] USA. I want them to speak Arabic fluently, and communicate with friends, neighbours, and relatives.”

All of the mothers demonstrated a positive attitude towards teaching English to their children and agreed that it is becoming increasingly important to be able to understand and communicate in English. The more educated mothers in the study group were seen to be more ambitious; one mother explained: “I am planning to teach my kids different languages – Chinese, French and Spanish. It is the time for a new generation to communicate effectively and easily with different people from all over the world.”

Mothers with less developed English language abilities demonstrated the same attitude and wanted their children to gain an understanding of English that was not possible when they were at school. Participant eight said: “I do not speak English very well, but I wanted my two girls to speak English and learn it. My generation is completely different from them.”

Similarly, participant ten said “I have three boys. During summertime, they do English classes with native speakers through Cambly APP. I cannot speak English, but my children will.”

4.4.2 Does Socioeconomic Level and Income Alter Parental Attitude to their Children's English Language Learning?

Mothers existing on a lower level of income, and lower social standing, experience fewer opportunities than those in a higher wage bracket. It does not, however, diminish their attitudes towards learning and helping their child to learn English.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research conducted in this investigation has determined that all parents, regardless of economic status, social standing, knowledge of English, previous educational experiences and background, have an optimistic approach to bilingualism. The mothers that were interviewed, believed that a bilingual person has access to more opportunities to travel, gain employment, gain knowledge, global travel, overseas study and develop an understanding of cultures around the globe. It can be argued that those children with higher income parents benefit from many material advantages such as studying abroad and private tutelage, but all parents, regardless of income, exhibited a

positive attitude towards their child's learning and this could be regarded as the most crucial factor in educational success. Finally, one participant said: "learning English should be the right for every child. Public school should change their policies and instead of one English subject, it should be more than that. They should help us and our children [to do so, it is not fair]: if I don't have money [it] does not mean my children cannot learn English."

References

Al-Seghayer, K. (2012, December 11). *Status and functions of English in Saudi Arabia*. Saudi Gazette.Com. <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20121211145659>

Alseweed, M. A., & Daif-Allah, A. S. (2012). *University Students' Perceptions of the Teaching Effectiveness of Native and Non-native Teachers of English in the Saudi Context*. *Language in India*, 12(7), 35 – 59.

Alshahrani, K., & Al-Shehri, S. (2012). *Conceptions and responses to e-learning: The case of EFL teachers and students in a Saudi Arabian university*. *Monash University Linguistics Papers*, 8(1), 21.

Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and Languages (Multilingual Matters, 83)*. Multilingual Matters. Clevedon, England.

Birdsong, D., & Molis, M. (2001). *On the evidence for maturational constraints in second-language acquisition*. *Journal of Memory and language*, 44(2), 235-249. DOI:10.1006/jmla.2000.2750

Fakeye, D. O. (2010). *Students' personal variables as correlates of academic achievement in English as a second language in Nigeria*. *Journal of social sciences*, 22(3), 205-211.

Jang, B. (2012). *Reducing instruction, increasing engagement*. <http://blog.stenhouse.com/archives/2012/07/23/blogstitute-week-5-reducing-instruction-increasing-engagement/>

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). *The effects of parental involvement on the academic achievement of African American youth*. The Journal of Negro Education, 260-274.

Karmani, S. (2005). *Islam, English, and 9/11*. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 4(2), 157-172. Doi: 10.1207/s15327701jlie0402_6

Ladegaard, H. J. (2000). *Language attitudes and sociolinguistic behaviour: Exploring attitude-behaviour relations in language*. Journal of sociolinguistics, 4(2), 214-233.

Lee, J. S., & Bowen, N. K. (2006). *Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the achievement gap among elementary school children*. American educational research journal, 43(2), 193-215.

Lee, S. K. (1999). *The linguistic minority parents' perceptions of bilingual education*. Bilingual Research Journal, 23(2-3), 199-210.

Marjoribanks, K. (1996). *Family learning environments and students' outcomes: A review*. Journal of comparative family studies, 27(2), 373-394.

National Statistical Office. (2011). *A report of the national adults reading to their children*. Bangkok: National Statistical Office, Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.

Oladejo, J. (2006). *Parents' attitudes towards bilingual education policy in Taiwan*. Bilingual Research Journal, 30(1), 147-170.

Rosenbusch, M., H., (1987). *Second language learning in young children. Retrospective Theses Dissertations. Paper 8581*. <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/8581>

Slameto. (2003). *Belajar Dan Faktor-Faktor Yang Mempengaruhinya*. Jakarta, Indonesia. PT. Rineka Cipta.

Soekanto, Soerjono. (2009). *Sosiologi suatu pengantar*. Jakarta, Indonesia. Rajawali Press.

Starks, D., & Paltridge, B. (1996). *A note on using sociolinguistic methods to study non-native attitudes towards English*. World Englishes, 15(2), 217-224.

Wang, L. J., & Chang, H. F. (2011). *Improve oral training: The method of innovation assessment on English speaking performance*. International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (IJDET), 9(3), 56-72.

Withers, A. C. (2004). *Hmong language and cultural maintenance in Merced, California*. Bilingual Research Journal, 28(3).

Young, A. S. (1994). *Motivational state and process within the sociolinguistic context: an Anglo-French comparative study of school pupils learning foreign languages*. Aston university. <https://research.aston.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/motivational-state-and-process-within-the-sociolinguistic-context>

Young, R. L. & Tran, M. T. (1999). *Vietnamese parents' attitudes toward bilingual education*. Bilingual Research Journal, 23 (2&3).

Yusup, N. B. and Ahmad, M. A., (2016). *The influence of parents' support and its relationship with students' achievement in English education*. International Conference on Education and Regional Development (ICERD 2016). Bandung, Indonesia. 657-662.