SOFTWARE

USES OF EDUCATIONAL SOFTWARE BY ESL PARENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

Children must be literate in both technology and English to survive in today's information society. An abundance of software is available for educational and recreational purposes. We get the software catalogs in our mailboxes, bookstores, toy stores, or supermarkets. "Sometimes it's packaged in cereal boxes and downloaded from the Internet. Every year, every month, every day there's more" (Stearns, 2001: 1). Children's software with colorful packages, exciting titles, and appealing graphics is everywhere.

Stearns (2001) emphasizes the fact that there are programs that open the door to exploration and discovery - software that encourages children to think, create, learn and communicate. But there is no research that would prove that all these software resources are beneficial to English as a Second Language (ESL) parents and children and whether they have access to these resources for teaching their children English at home. It is believed that some ESL parents use educational software for either educational or recreational purposes, but it is difficult to discover how they teach their children English at home and what materials they use. It is also useful to examine whether ESL parents get any benefits by working with such software for teaching their children English and how they use them. For the study, the data collection was based on five face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions and more flexibility depending on the interviewee's situation. To analyze the data, I isolated 5 different themes from the interview data: teaching materials, teaching methods, materials selecting methods, conflicting views of educational technologies and suggestions.

Based on the interviews, this study will attempt to formulate the suggestions about the educational software from ESL parents directly.

Conceptual Context

Unfortunately, there is little research about the use of educational software by ESL parents. So in this paper, the meaning about the general use of educational software, which is the learning materials, lack of computer knowledge and guidelines for selecting educational software are used.

Materials

Kitao (1997) provided the views of materials and selecting materials by emphasizing that materials control and help learning and teaching. Materials include textbooks, video and audiotapes, computer software, and visual aids. Many teachers and parents rely heavily on them, and the materials control the content, methods, and procedures of teaching and learning. Kitao (1997) noted that the choice of deductive vs. inductive learning, the role of memorization, the engagement of creativity and problem solving, production vs. reception, and the order in which materials are presented are all influenced by them. The author made good points for selecting the materials, especially for ESL children. In materials, English should be correct, natural, recent, and standard. Since students' vocabulary is limited, the vocabulary in materials should be comprehensible enough to enable students to understand the texts and deduce unfamiliar expressions.

Lack of computer knowledge

Most teachers and parents in the U.S. believe that special computer software can help children learn to read and may entice them to read by colorful graphics, interactive games and virtually unlimited on-line resources ("Tips For Parents," 2001). In addition, two out of three children in the U.S. who have a computer at home use it to do homework, according to a study by NPD Online Research (Pastore, 1999). However, most parents are anxious about the lack of time and knowledge to help their children use computer (Pastore, 1999). "As parents do with television, children need parents to help them guide to use computer program. However, parents lack the confidence, skills, and resources to help their children" (Pastore, 1999: 2).

Guidelines for selecting software

Content

Bishop (2001) points out that software should help attain curriculum goals. For example, many educational publishers also publish software that are connected with the curriculum. Parents should beware of choosing software just because they are popular or hyped by the media. Sometimes, these programs are not intended for classroom or home use ("Educational Technology," 2001).

Help in the native language

Bishop (2001) stated that research in the field of language learning has found that even at the most advanced levels of English language development students benefit from assistance in their native language. This may help resolve issues of meaning or clarify instructions.

True educational interactivity

Immediate feedback for self-correction and practice or rewards for accuracy are essential for language learning. Programs that record a user's verbal responses and compare them to a native speaker's, or that use voice recognition, are very useful. Also, since repetition is a critical aspect of language learning, the software should make it more fun to repeat and practice by using varying examples, graphics, animations, and other exciting options.

Ease of use by students

Choosing software that is easy to use is an absolute necessity. So parents should be sure the program is easy enough for the child to use independently. For example, parents should be sure that the technical requirements on the software package match the computers they already have at home. ("Educational Technology," 2001). What is more, programs should feature clear buttons and commands, on-screen directions, and a user's guide (Stearns, 2001).

Age-appropriateness

Bradin (1999) notes that learners may not feel challenged by too simple language in the software while the beginning or intermediate students may be frustrated by very complex language with many unknown words. There are many language learning programs for younger children and adults learning English, but there are limited choices for middle and high school students with no

knowledge of English. Parents should not insult the intelligence of a teenager with "baby" software just because he or she cannot speak English. Krashen (1985) pointed that the level of materials should be slightly more difficult than the students' current level of English proficiency so that the materials allow them to learn new grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Cultural sensitivity

Cultural stereotypes such as a variety of physically different human characters in the videos or graphics can be included. Moreover, parents should make sure that the program represents not only a variety of cultures, but also a variety of economic settings. If all the situations are in upper-middle class settings, students of limited economic means may feel at a disadvantage..

Summary

Many researchers agreed that educational technology materials are important aspects of the teaching and learning process. Also, some articles pointed that parents don't have enough knowledge for computer and educational software. However, there are few articles that deal with how the educational software is used at home and what the parents' desires for the educational software are. It is widely emphasized that educational technology should be used but there is little attention devoted to the real consumers' opinions. Therefore, this study will focus on ESL parents and the uses of educational software at home.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. What kinds of teaching method and materials do ESL parents use to help their kids learn English?
2. What kind of educational software do they use to teach their children English at home?
3. How do they select and use educational software?
4. If they do not use any software, why don't they use it?
5. How is educational software helpful for children to learn English at home?
6. What are their suggestions or comments for educational software?

Methods

Sampling

I visited the international program office at a large university in the Pacific Northwest in the United States to find possible participants. I asked the international families who have ESL children and can communicate in English. I got permission from 5 out of 7 possible participants and made individual appointments.

All 5 subjects live in one local university area and at least one person from each couple attends graduate-level education. All subjects are from Asia; 2 Koreans, 2 Japanese, and 1 Chinese. Also, they are not able to speak English fluently. The age of their children ranges from 3 years to 10 years. All participants' children had little pre-knowledge of English in their native countries and have learned or are learning in America.

Data Collection

I conducted open-ended interviews and took field notes. Before the interview, I started with chitchat to break the ice instead of strictly interrogating the participants. I retold the purpose of my study very briefly and assured confidentiality to make the interviewee relax. I set the audio recorder to record the interview. During the interviews, I tried to encourage getting fuller descriptions from each interviewee. The lengths of interview vary from 30 minutes to 1 hour. After each interview, I transcribed it verbatim.

Analysis Procedure

I selected 5 different themes that I could see commonly in all interview data. These were teaching materials, teaching methods, materials selecting methods, the conflicted views of educational software, and suggestions or comments. I coded the data with colored pencils according to these 5 themes. After that I took all the "meaning units" with the same code and put themes together into excerpt files by cutting and pasting with the aid of a computer. I put all together into an overall coherent framework.

Validity

The sample of subjects for this study is biased because all interviewees come from one university area and are highly educated, so the results can be affected by the parents' educational

background. This study is only based on 5 interviewees, so the results of study can be subjective and changed very easily. Even though little research is available in this area, it can provide some ideas for educational software and ESL parents. Furthermore, it will provide some recommendations for future research.

Analysis

The Teaching Materials & Methods

The 5 parents mentioned that schools (or childcare), television, books, toys and videos are their teaching materials in common. Additionally, two interviewees added English songs and three interviewees added software as materials.

Interviewees believe that their children learn English by playing with other American friends and teachers at school, while the school is a good place where children can practise listening and speaking English because all interviewees use their native first language at home with their children. Two parents strongly believe that school is the best material to learn English for their children. But when I asked what materials or methods the teacher uses to teach English at school, they did not know at all or knew very roughly. From this I assumed a lack of communication with schools and teachers.

Books are also used to teach English at home. They usually buy simple picture books and read together with children. All interviewees read books together and explained the content in their mother tongue. Two interviewees mentioned selecting the books that have a lot of pictures or famous characters so that the children can imagine the content and do not get bored with the contents soon.

Two interviewees use songs. They listened to an English song, mostly cartoon songs or children's songs, in the car. One interviewee claimed that she did not play song in the car to teach English, but she believes that her child learns English songs because she follows the song sometimes. However, the parent is not sure whether the child understands the content of the songs. All interviewees also buy a lot of toys for fun rather than for teaching English. But they believe if English sound is played from the toys, it will be helpful for their children to learn the language unconsciously.

According to the interview, television and video are powerful tools to teach English at home. They believe that children learn English by watching films or programs on TV or video. The

parents know that children understand and learn something in English by children's interaction or motion with TV characters. Children have their own favorite movies or programs and watch them over and over. They say what the characters say in the next scene, retell the story, or solve problems, learning all the English sentences and expressions. When children watch movies or TV programs, all interviewees just let them watch alone.

2 interviewees use software to teach their children English and one interviewee uses software as a computer game rather than teaching English. One interviewee mentioned the fact that the computer software are really good because children can really interact with animated characters at an appropriate learning level. When they use computer software, they play together at least a couple of times until their children feel comfortable to play alone. Interviewees commented:

> Seven out ten, I play together with them. My kids are not really good at computer because they are young. I just play with them. I turn on the computer and open the game and read through questions, and they just answer and I just click the answer for them. They just sit next to me and say this is right or wrong and I control the entire computer.

> When I started to use computer software for the first time, my son just watched what my husband and I was doing. We explained what it was going on and asked my kid to answer. As time went, he started to learn how to use the computer. After a couple of months, he used the computer alone. Of course, he didn't know why he needed to do that but he simply remembered the procedure to enjoy the software. Right now, he can set up the software alone and play alone. He is really good at it. So he learned English and computer together.

Methods of selecting software

Three out of five interviewees use computer software. They rely on their children's choice and a CD cover to select software. No one gets any help from experts or resources. One interviewee said that he asks American friends or international parents to select software because he does not have any ideas about educational software, especially for beginner for English learning. Also, sometimes he shares the software with other international parents.

Another interviewee said that she buys the software that her son wants to buy or she sees the pictures on the cover and reads the review of the product on the backside of CD. Because she cannot get any detailed information about selecting software, she selects software based on characters, company, price, and her son's choice. Her son selects software based only on animation characters.

A third interviewee has long experience using software. He selects software based on his kid's choice. And he also looks at the CD cover to look for child appeal and interests - playful programs with appealing graphics, sound, music, animation, and a sense of humor. He commented,

> We saw the characters. If there are characters that my son likes, we select it because my son really enjoys when there are some characters he likes. So he keeps playing to see the characters even though he doesn't understand. And we saw the CD covers, so we can know what contents are, what my son can learn, and what the age levels are. But we don't want to buy just for educational purpose. It should be fun so my son can keep using the software. So I choose the software for educational purpose and fun. Nowadays, my son chooses what he wants. We always ask why he needs to buy this. So he can explain what will be good for him. If it is reasonable, we buy it.

Conflicting views of Educational Software

All interviewees agree that software will be more fun than reading a picture book and it will be much easier to learn English. Children can also learn the basic computer operations such as how to use mouse, turn on the computer, and set up the software. They believe that software is interactive and fun. Children like programs because of characters, even though they sometimes do not know what is going on. Although they do not understand English, they keep watching because of characters and music.

One interviewee stated that educational software is really more effective than parents' teaching because parents are also international, so their pronunciation is really poor and English broken. Software uses standard American English, so it is a much better model for learning English than parents. Also he mentioned that software is very good for shy and inactive children. For example, one interviewee's son does not like to play outside and is very shy, so he believes that for his son, software is the best way to learn English.

On the other hand, one interviewee complained that computer software is very expensive and if he buys software and his kid does not like it, it is useless. While the parents can see the content of books before they buy, software is hard to know what kind product is because they cannot see inside and play before they buy. Also two interviewees do not know how to use the computer and have not felt any need to use it to teach their kids English. They believe that books, movies and TV are enough for their children. One interviewee said that they do not have to buy something to teach English because communication with friends is the best way to learn English.

One interviewee complained about the quality of software, and she explained that children tried every possible answer but after several experiences, they memorized what happens and what they should push. And then they just follow their memory rather than make a conscious learning effort. .

Suggestions

The parents had these suggestions about the educational software:

1. More detailed descriptions are necessary. The CD cover is not enough to decide for parents whether they should buy the program or not. Mostly the covers have some appealing fancy pictures, so children want to buy the software for the pictures rather than the content.

2. With the software, some supplement will be helpful (i.e. Alphabet cards or usage guidelines)

3. Educational aspect and parents' needs should be the first concern rather than commercial aims to sell.

4. The content of software should focus on the narrow area with some detail rather than broad areas.

5. Software designers should consult in-service ESL teachers while developing programs.

6. It would be helpful to see best selling lists or recommendation list for parents in the store. There is a book best selling list in the bookstore but no software best selling list in the software section.

7. Some community services will be helpful. Parents want to learn how to use the computer and what is available to teach their children English, math or science.

8. Parents should select programs that match their child's age and ability. Even though the appropriate age-level for the software is defined, it is different depending on the child's ability.

Conclusion

In the last decade, the number of K-12 classrooms using computers and software has risen steadily and most people have access to a computer at home. However, according to my

interviews, ESL parents do not follow the current trend of educational software and do not get enough benefit to teach their children.   As the importance of English has increased internationally, many foreign countries have invested huge sums of money in developing educational programs to teach English. Since many parents believe that their children must become literate in English to have a brighter future, they are willing to help their children to learn English. But according to my interviews, ESL parents still use traditional materials such as TV, video, book, songs and toys. Two out of five interviewees do not use computers at all because they do not know them and do not feel any need to use software to teach English at home. Also three interviewees who use software do not have concrete ideas about how to use software effectively and want to have more detailed guidelines. Moreover, they highly depend on their children's choice and a software cover to select software. It is suggested that software companies should consider some ways to inform the ESL parents about the available software . What is more, as one interviewee suggested, schools or communities should provide some computer sessions or discussions to share with teachers, software companies, or other parents what is available and how they can use software effectively.

As I mentioned, this study was based on the interviews with 5 ESL parents. For further research, including more subjects with various ethical, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds would be necessary. Also, an ESL interviewer will be useful to get fuller information during interviews because ESL participants might feel more comfortable.

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