

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS IN L2 LEARNING

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Abstract

It has been established by research that motivation can play a vital role in second language learning. Research also shows that there is a strong connection between parental role and learners' motivation in L2 learning. This article aims to describe the parents' contribution to children's learning, especially in L2 learning. The exploration of literature related to parental role indicates that parental influence is very high on their children while learning a second language. Moreover, this article reveals the nature of parental influence on children's learning process. It also discovers the current research needs of this field.

Introduction

Although language learning is an individual activity, every learner lives in society and is surrounded by other members of society. Among these people, students spend a large amount of time with their parents. Therefore, parents have an impact on their children's learning process and achievement and their role is significant in modifying children's motivation. Recently, motivation has been referred to as an umbrella term which includes various variables that have little connection with each other (Dörnyei, 2001). Among these variables, parental role is a key component. In the field of SLA, scholars have also agreed about the parental influences on L2 learning (Gardner, 1985). However, despite this insight, the research to date on this topic has been inadequate and further research in this area is justified by the importance accorded to parental influences in the literature.

In this paper, I will present a critical review of the literature on parental influences while learning a second language. The discussion will be divided into two main sections. *First*, I will briefly discuss parental influence in the field of psychology. *Then* I will focus on parental roles in student motivation while learning a second language.

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1. Discussion of parental influences in psychology

The main theme of the discussion of the parental role or influence is that parents have an influence on their children—either positive or negative. Child psychologists, social psychologists and educational psychologists have already asserted that parents have an influential effect on student motivation in learning and achieving success.

1.1 Parental influence and child psychology

Since the middle of the twentieth century, noticeable social changes have occurred in western societies. Consequently, many traditional ideas of the family have changed and many new ideas and concepts have developed. These emerging new thoughts have shaped traditional parental roles as well. Currently, all over the world due to maternal employment, the mothers' role as homemakers and caregivers has changed and their involvement outside the home has sharply increased. As a result, fathers are no longer considered the only breadwinner of the family. Moreover, fathers now also share the responsibilities of children's care and in some situations, they even act as the main caregiver of the family (Schaffer, 2004). The changes in, family concepts mentioned earlier also have an impact on child-rearing.

Although according to available research evidence it is difficult to identify any clear, good or bad impact of maternal employment on child development; it is safe to conclude that compared to non-employed mothers, children with working mothers can benefit more if the available conditions are optimal because the additional experiences with other adults and with peers in daycare centres can contribute positively to children's psychological development (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 2002, cited in Schaffer, 2004). In this connection, I would like to add that due to financial causes, children with employed mothers might have better facilities, which can ultimately have a favourable impact on their development.

1.2 Parental influence and social psychology

Social influence - i.e. the influence of other people is the main issue in the study of social psychology. It is quite natural that amongst all the relevant people parents might have an important role in an individual's life. The nature of society in which students as human beings live their

lives also has an impact on their achievements. Asian and Latin American societies are mainly collectivistic-oriented societies and Western societies are examples of individualistic-oriented societies (Triandis, 1995; Fuligni & Tseng, 1999). It could be argued that due to its inherent nature, in a collectivistic society parents are more deeply involved in their children's learning.

Apart from the nature of society, the features of the family context in which learners grow up can also influence their learning process and achievement. The research conducted by Fuligni et al. (1999) shows that compared to European adolescents, Asian and Latin American adolescents expressed stronger values and greater expectations in terms of their duty to assist, respect and support their families. The most important point, addressed by this research is that family obligations and academic motivation are positively related to each other. In this regard, my observation as a citizen of this country, I would like to argue that family obligations have a great influence on the motivation of Bangladeshi students in their English language learning.

Moreover, it can also be assumed that apart from parental support in English learning Bangladeshi students receive support and help from other family members as well. The research study of Caplan et. al (1991) has addressed this issue. The subjects of their study were refugees who arrived in the United States from Indochina and in their education, the children of these refugee families made more progress than they expected. The findings of this large-scale investigation show that for the issue of homework, the children of these families received help from their siblings, with the older sibling teaching the younger. About the issue of support and help, from other family members, it can be assumed that children who live in extended families can also receive support and help from uncles, aunts and cousins. In this regard, a participant in Lamb's (2002) study which followed the qualitative research method, mentioned that in L2 learning he received help from his uncle.

1.3 Parental influence and educational psychology

Educational psychology can be closely related to L2 learning when it takes place in formal contexts. Since parental involvement in learning is undeniable, educational psychologists have also examined the role of the parents' influence on their children's learning. Dörnyei (2001) has

mentioned that the parents' role is significant in shaping student motivation to learn and it has a great influence even in school contexts, although parents do not have any direct involvement in school learning.

Research in the field of educational psychology has confirmed that parents influence their children's achievement motivation. The results of the research by Parsons et al. (1982) reveal that parental perceptions and expectations about the children were positively associated with the children's perception of their parent's beliefs and with the children's self and task perceptions. Therefore, parents who believe that mathematics is difficult for their children and who believe that their children are not good enough at mathematics have children who express a low self-concept of their ability in mathematics: these children consider mathematics as a hard subject and have low expectancies about their future performance in mathematics. The results further indicate that regarding children's abilities, children's attitudes are more influenced by their parents' attitudes about their children's abilities than by their past performances. Similar findings have emerged from the study of Eccles (1993). Her work has indicated that "parents' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about their children's abilities are critical mediators of children's academic self and task beliefs—more critical in some instance than either the children's own academic performance or classroom experiences" (Eccles, 1993, p. 146).

Eccles et al. (1998) have reviewed the early work of parental influence on student achievement and summarised four parenting components which have been identified as the most influential factors in modifying student motivation. These four components are: i) developmentally appropriate timing of achievement demands/pressure, ii) high confidence in one's children's abilities, iii) a supportive effective family climate, and iv) highly motivated role models. Moreover, the early work also highlighted that these four variables generally function in combination with each other to increase high-need achievement.

2. Parental influence and L2 learning

At the beginning of this article, it has already been mentioned that parents can influence their children's motivation and interest in L2 learning. Among the main theories and approaches of L2 motivation, social psychological theories, socio-cultural and contextual approaches and Williams and Burden's framework of L2 motivation have put significant importance on the parental role in second language learning.

Robert Gardner, one of the founders of L2 motivation research and the proponent of the social-psychological theory of L2 motivation, has dedicated a whole chapter in his book *Social psychology and second language learning* (1985) to discuss the role of parents in L2 learning. Moreover, the Attitudes/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), which is the best known motivational questionnaire, based on Gardner's social psychological theory also includes a component labelled 'parental encouragement' in L2 learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Since *attitude* is the central issue of social-psychological theory, the discussion on parental influence by Gardner and other social-psychology-oriented scholars is mainly dominated by the relationship between the parents' and the learners' attitudinal disposition.

One of the prime themes of the socio-cultural and contextual approaches is social motivation and from a social motivation perspective the family represents a primary source of impact on the learners' motivation. Socio-cultural and contextual approaches discuss the role of parents as a part of the process by which society affects its members.

In this connection, it is worth indicating that Williams and Burden's (1997) framework of L2 motivation considers two distinct factors: internal factors and external factors. External factors consist of five variables and among these variables, one is the 'significant others'. This 'significant others' variable highlights several issues and the role of parents is also included within these issues.

The study of Anongnad Petchprasert (2014) indicates that parental influence and English language learning are positively associated; the researcher has explored an Asian context that is Thailand. The study of Li (2007) also shows that parents have a significant impact on children's second language learning. Li (2007) has investigated the children of Chinese immigrant families in the Canadian context. Another research study, conducted by Zhou (2020) has reported that the environment of the family does influence children's foreign language learning. The study of Kalayci and Öz (2018) demonstrates that parents have a significantly positive involvement in their children's L2 learning; this study has explored the context of Turkey. All the studies after 2000 convey a very significant message and that is family still has an important influence on L2 learning even in the twenty-first century.

2.1 L2 learning: Types of parental influence

There are many ways in which parents can influence their children's language learning. The parental role of language learners was first distinguished by Gardner (1968). He has suggested two types of parental roles: active role and passive role.

Active role: According to Gardner (1985)

... parents play an active role when they encourage their children to do well, when they monitor their language learning performance, and when they reinforce any successes identified by the school. The mother who teaches additional words or phrases, or comments on some aspect of pronunciation is obviously displaying an active role (p. 110).

This statement indicates two different types of active roles: direct and indirect. Encouragement, monitoring and reinforcement can be addressed as an indirect active role of parents. In contrast, parents' L2 teaching can be identified as having a direct active role.

The active role does not always indicate positive parental thoughts and behaviours – it can also be negative. When parents agree with their children that learning an L2 is nothing but a complete waste of time then it becomes an example of an active negative role. Gardner (1985) has hypothesised that parental individual differences influence the selection of active positive and negative roles and this selection has an impact on their children's L2 acquisition. He has also indicated that there is a lack of research to identify the dimensions of an active role and to suggest the connection between active parental involvement and their children's L2 proficiency.

Passive role : The passive role relates to the parent's attitude towards the second language community and their contribution to developing their children's attitudes. Compared to the active role, the passive role is 'subtle' because the parents may be unaware of it. However, if the parental attitudes are reflected in the parent's active role then the impact of these attitudes becomes salient rather than subtle. The discussion and research on ethnic attitudes in the literature had an influenced on developing Gardner's passive role.

Gardner (1985) argues that according to the extent of parental positive attitudes towards the L2 community, parents will nurture their children's integrative motives. He has also highlighted that active and passive roles

can be independent. It means that parents who do not have any positive attitudes can still actively support their children's language learning. However, he has stressed that "parental attitudes could be influential in the language learning context even where parents play a supportive role" (p. 110). Therefore, he has concluded that both roles – active and passive – should be equally considered.

Furthermore, Gardner intended to establish a connection between positive parental attitudes towards the L2 community and their child's L2 proficiency. It can be recalled that integrative motivation is the prime issue in Gardner's social psychological theory. Due to this fact, Gardner considers parental positive attitudes which shape integrative motivation, as a vital factor in L2 learning. However, it has also been mentioned that scholars in the field of L2 motivation have recently pointed out that integrative motivation is not necessarily an essential factor in a monolingual context. In a similar vein, I would like to argue that the parents' passive role, that is, attitudes towards the L2 community, is not an influential factor in L2 learning contexts where the target language is taught in a monolingual setting. Parents' attitudes towards the L2, in other words, parental instrumental orientations, are more important in this particular setting. Moreover, the parental active role is more significant in such a context.

3. Parental influence: The empirical evidence

Since the 1960s researchers have been exploring the issue of parental involvement in L2 learning. Similarly to the research on student motivation to learn an L2, most of the research studies (Gardner 1960; Feenstra, 1967; Gardner & Santos, 1970; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Frasure-Smith et al., 1975, Desrochers & Gardner, 1981; Colletta et al., 1983, Gardner et al., 1999) on parental influences in L2 learning have been conducted in Canada, which has a special linguistic context due to its multiethnic and multicultural settings. However, a few investigations (Sharma, 1983; Lyon & Ellis, 1991; Kraemer, 1993) have been conducted to explore the same issue in other countries and some studies have explored the monolingual context (Haque, 1994; Maniruzzman, 1998, Lamb, 2002). In this respect, the research study by Lamb (2002) is worth mentioning. This qualitative study indicates that in difficult learning circumstances parents can play a role in shaping their children's

motivation for L2 learning. This study further reveals that parents can have an influence on their children's motivation even in a situation when the parents themselves do not have L2 proficiency. Recently L2 motivation research has developed dramatically, about parental influences in learning a second language. Gardner and his social psychological theory are still dominating this particular area.

Most of the research investigations support the consensus that parents do play a large role in their children's L2 learning (Gardner, 1960; Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al., 1999; Kraemer, 1993; Haque, 1994; Chamber, 1999, Feenstra, 1967; Gardner & Santos, 1970; Gardner & Smythe, 1975). Nevertheless, a few research studies can be found that present contradictory results (Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Desrochers & Gardner, 1981; Colletta et al., 1983): some of these investigations have explored the nature of parental attitude and motivation without showing its effect on student motivation (Frasure-Smith et al., 1975; Sharma, 1983; Lyon and Ellis; 1991), whereas others have intended to explore the issue by establishing a link between parents' influence and their children's learning (Gardner, 1960; Feenstra, 1967; Gardner & Santos, 1970; Gardner & Smythe, 1975). Since empirical research has shown that parents of language learners influence their children, research on parents' attitudes and motivation, without showing their effect on student motivation is also important to discuss and investigate.

3.1 Parents' motivational distinctions

In this section, I will discuss two research studies which reveal the pattern of parents' motivation without showing its direct impact on their children's motivation.

Sharma (1983) carried out a quantitative study in a multicultural context in Britain. His research aimed to study ethnic minorities attitudes toward their home language and the English proficiency of their children in schools by applying the distinction of integrative and instrumental motivation. The results show that fathers overwhelmingly supported the maintenance of the home language in their children's schools. Regarding the home language, the attitudes of these fathers were not related to the instrumental/integrative motivational distinction. These parents were strongly attached through the home language to their own ethnic or cultural communities. However, about to the English language, these

fathers' attitudes were related to the children's instrumental and integrative motivation. Although Sharma's study confirms that the distinctions between integrative and instrumental motivations are prevalent among language learners' parents, it did not explore how it influences their children's motivation.

Concerning integrative and instrumental orientation, the research study of Sharma (1983) has highlighted an important issue. The scores for integrative items for the English language were lower; however, for the instrumental items, the scores were higher. Sharma (1983) has predicted that the reason for the low integrative motivation was parental fear about their children losing their home culture. This finding is remarkable in the sense that it indicates that parents can have a stronger instrumental than integrative motivation about their children's L2 learning even in a situation where they are directly exposed to the L2 community. This highlights the fact that instrumental motivation is significant even in a multicultural context. Moreover, it supports the claim that the distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation is indeed closely related to the values that are associated with the L2 in a particular society. In Pakistan, the "acquisition of many languages is regarded as a useful and valuable asset of a child's academic life" (Sharma, 1983, p. 319).

Lyon and Ellis (1991) have also investigated the context of Britain, particularly North Wales. The main aim of their research was to find out who supports the use and learning of Welsh and to identify factors related to a parental positive attitude towards the Welsh language. Despite the overall decline in the Welsh language, North Wales has traditionally been a stronghold of the Welsh language and Welsh-speaking ability is an essential requirement to get Local Authority employment and to get many other jobs as well. After the Welsh Language Act of 1967, Welsh achieved equal status to English. The participants of Lyon and Ellis's (1991) study were 384 mothers who were living in Anglesey, North Wales.

The results of the study show that 86% of parents were interested in their children's Welsh language learning at school or wanted their children to be fluent in Welsh. Furthermore, the results indicate two main reasons behind parental interest in their children's Welsh language learning: Welsh identity, which the researchers have addressed as integrative motivation, and enhancement of future job prospects. Mainly, Welsh-speaking parents had integrative reasons whereas English-speaking parents had instrumental reasons. Similarly to Sharma's (1983) study, the study of Lyon and Ellis

(1991) did not explore how parental motivation influences children's L2 learning.

3.2 Other features of motivational construct and L2 learning

Apart from integrative and instrumental orientation, other features of the L2 motivational construct can also influence parents' decisions when they think about their children's language learning. Among these factors, parents' concept of ethnic identity is a significant factor and it has been supported by research evidence. Recall that the study of Sharma (1983) has indicated that regarding the home-language parents have a strong feeling about their ethnic identity. Recently, scholars in the domain of L2 motivation have intended to see ethnic identity as a component of L2 motivation. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Lyon and Ellis (1991) have labelled ethnic identity as 'integrative motivation'.

Frasure-Smith et al. (1975) investigated parents' involvement in terms of choosing the language of instruction at their children's school in the Canadian context. This study reveals three main issues which influence the parents' selecting their children's schooling: (i) parents' concept of ethnic identity and how they perceive the effect of studying another language on their ethnic identity (whether as a cost or a reward); (ii) the quality of education, provided by the school (iii) parents' background characteristics (their birthplace). As Gardner (1985) has mentioned, this study highlights the fact that parents' decision of their children's language schooling is not always influenced by attitudinal issues. With regard to ethnic identity, the parents' concept of ethnic identity is likely an important factor in multicultural context whereas in unicultural setting this might be a less influential issue.

3.3 Supporting evidence

Research which supports the role of parental influence on children's language learning mainly focuses on two issues: (i) the influence of parental attitudinal characteristics on their children's attitudes; (ii) the impact of students' perception of their parental encouragement.

Relations between parents' and their children's attitude

There are some research studies which have tried to investigate the link between parents' attitudinal characteristics and their children's attitudinal characteristics. To the best of my knowledge, the first research

on this area was carried out by Robert Gardner in 1960. The results showed that these mothers and their children shared the same attitudinal orientation. The students with integrative orientation had mothers who were integratively orientated and the students who had instrumental orientation had instrumentally-orientated mothers. Moreover, compared to instrumentally-orientated mothers, integratively-orientated mothers had more positive attitudes towards French Canadians. Similarly, a study by Feenstra (1967) also shows that there is a positive relationship between parents' and their children's attitudes. The results suggest that with regard to French learning students with an integrative orientation had parents who also had an integrative orientation. The results further indicate that parents who had favourable attitudes towards the French community intended to encourage their children to do well in French language learning.

The study of Gardner and Santos (1970) explored the influence of parents' attitudes in an Asian setting, the Philippines. English was an important second language in the Philippines when this research was conducted: It was the medium of instruction in schools and the medium of the implications of laws and the constitution. The vernacular languages were used for social interaction in an informal setting. The research in this particular setting where English had a high instrumental value indicated that parental influences in L2 learning were indeed very significant. The participants of this study were 103 senior high school students and they had completed approximately six years of formal learning in English. The parents of these students were also involved in the study. The quantitative analysis of the results suggests that there was a positive relationship between parents' orientations and students' orientation: Instrumentally-oriented parents had children with the same orientation and integratively-oriented children had parents who had a positive attitude towards the L2 community. Moreover, this study shows an association between parental integrative orientation and parental supportive variables. This particular finding indicates that there might be a connection between parents' orientation and the support provided by them.

Students' perception of their parental encouragement and support

To explore the issue of encouragement of parents, L2 motivation researchers include the variable – 'parental encouragement to learn the L2' in their research studies. The idea of this variable refers to the "student's

perception of the amount of encouragement” s/he gets from her/his parents to learn a second language (Gardner & Smythe, 1975, p.223). Research evidence shows that students’ perception of their parental encouragement has an impact on their motivation while learning a second language.

Gardner and Smythe (1975) investigated 100 Anglophone-Canadian students in Grades 9 to Grade 11 who were learning French as a second language. The results show that compared to stay-in students, the dropout students had less favourable attitudes towards French Canadians and the European French, had a less positive attitude towards French learning, and perceived less parental encouragement for French learning. These students also showed less effort and less desire to learn French and they had a low interest in foreign languages. From the point of view of the present discussion, the most relevant interpretation of these results is that learners’ perception of their parents’ encouragement does play a role in L2 learning. Nevertheless, the study conducted by Feenstra and Gardner (1968, cited in Gardner & Smythe, 1975), indicates that students perceptions about their parental encouragement do not always completely agree with the parents’ real encouragement.

Moreover, Gardner (1985) has also investigated the impact of parental encouragement on aspects of second language learning other than attitude and motivation. He tested 31 students’ intentions to continue studying French. The results indicate that these students would continue to study French if they were convinced that they would receive their parents’ support. The results further revealed that “the correlations of parental encouragement with both motivational intensity and behavioural intention to continue French study tend to be lower with the older students” (Gardner, 1985, p. 122). This is an important finding because it highlights that parental encouragement has less impact on older children.

More recently, Gardner et al. (1999) investigated the impact of home characteristics on L2 learning by focusing on the Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition. In this study, they have examined parental encouragement from a temporal perspective. The analysis of data shows that “parents play a role in the development of reactions toward the learning situation as well as in the language learning efforts of their children” (p. 433). Students’ attitudes toward the learning situation were

related to French class anxiety, parental encouragement, and motivational intensity. Furthermore the motivational intensity was related to French class anxiety and parental encouragement. The finding of this study is remarkable in the sense that it indicates the power of parental influence, having implications over a long period.

A research study by Kraemer (1993) highlights the issue of parental influences in a quite different setting, Israel. The participants of this study were 484 10th grade Israeli students who were studying Arabic. The results indicate that students' perception of parental support was positive: they perceived their parents to be supportive of their Arabic learning. About to this study, it is worth mentioning that although Arabic is available in Israeli society, due to the political conflict there is little actual exposure to the Arabic language. Therefore, the situation in Israel for Arabic language learners is, to some extent, similar to the learners in a monolingual context. This study reveals that students' perception their parental support is important in L2 learning even in a non-Canadian context.

Although the majority of the investigations of parental influence in L2 learning demonstrates a positive influence of parents on their children's learning, a few research studies have failed to indicate any positive relationship between parental influence and children's learning. Examples of this type of research are Lambert and Tucker (1972), Desrochers and Gardner (1981) and Colletta et al. (1983) – these studies have also investigated the Canadian context similar to the ones where many research studies have succeeded to demonstrate parental influence on their children. It is interesting to note that although this study failed to show any link between parental influence and student variables, it does confirm the dual parental roles: active and passive.

3.4 Parental influence: Bangladeshi context

Despite the dominance of multicultural contexts, there have been a few research studies, which have been conducted to investigate the parental role in a 'unicultural' context. To the best of my knowledge, two investigations have been carried out to examine the parental role in the context of Bangladesh, which is mainly a monolingual and 'unicultural' country.

Haque (1994) has examined parental involvement in developing children's attitudes toward L2 learning in Bangladesh. The quantitative analysis of his research showed that in L2 learning the students' orientation was highly related to their parents' orientation. The results indicated that integratively-oriented students had integratively-oriented parents and instrumentally-oriented students had instrumentally-oriented parents. Similarly, students' attitude towards English learning was positively correlated with their parents' attitude towards English learning. This study reveals that in Bangladesh parents' and their children's attitudinal characteristics are closely related. Furthermore, considering Haque's research investigation, it could be concluded that like multilingual and multicultural settings, in monolingual and uncultural settings, the parents' role is also influential to developing their children's attitudes.

Concerning monolingual context, in general, Gardner and Clément (1990) argue that in such contexts other contextual factors such as the L2 learning environment and encouragement of parents may significantly contribute to student motivation and achievement. Extending from Gardner and Clément's argument, it is meaningful to propose that parents may play an even larger role in student motivation and achievement in the context where they get unsatisfactory facilities and support from the immediate language learning situation that is the L2 classroom. Therefore, parents may play a vital role in the third world where due to inadequate support English Language Teaching (ELT) is suffering in formal learning contexts.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the parents' influence on their children's learning, specifically on L2 learning. The overview, presented in this paper indicates that during the last six decades, several investigations have been carried out in the field of SLA to explore the parental role and the majority of these research studies have shown that parents have an influential role in their children's learning in both multilingual and monolingual contexts. The discussion also shows that the bulk of the research has been devoted to investigating parents' attitudinal characteristics and how these relate to the students' attitudinal development. However, until now the active role of parents has received insufficient research attention.

In addition, there is also an imbalance in that most of the past research has focused on multilingual rather than monolingual contexts. Two main arguments have been presented in this paper. *Firstly*, due to the recent development of our understanding of L2 motivation, we will need to explore parents' active involvement rather than focusing merely on passive parental attitudinal characteristics. *Secondly*, parental role and support are very important in contexts where students receive little help and support from the formal learning context. The literature review in the present writing also indicates that quantitative methods have been dominating the domain of parental influence research in L2 learning. Therefore, there is a need for exploratory qualitative research methodology in this area to shed new light on the issue.

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