



Parental Perceptions of the Ideal Foreign Language Teacher: Voices from Eight Countries

Early language education has become a global trend as parents from around the world increasingly enroll their children in language classes at preschool or pre-preschool ages. The younger the FL learners are, the greater the parents' role in their children's learning process – and the more they may be motivated to be involved in their children's schoolwork, learning aims, and the way they are being instructed. But what do they want from FL teachers when their children are just beginning their language studies? This topic brought together 14 students from different parts of the world. Students from Canada, China, Colombia, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, and Vietnam enrolled in the Research in Early Language Education course at the University of Eastern Finland completed a study asking the above-mentioned question. This article discusses the findings from said study.

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Defining the qualities of the “ideal” teacher

What qualities define an effective teacher? As noted by Plavšić and Diković (2016), it really depends on who you ask since students, teachers, and parents prioritize different qualities when defining the ideal teacher. The majority of studies into the desired characteristics of teachers focus on the student's perspective and have found students to value, for example, a teacher's personality, teaching ability, and social skills (Alkan, 2013; Bakx et al, 2015; Raufelder et al, 2016). Meanwhile, studies from the teacher's perspective have found teachers to regard positive personality traits and teaching abilities as the most desirable qualities in their peers. (Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004; Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011).

Studies on parental definitions of the ideal teacher, however, are surprisingly uncommon. Most notably, Tatar and Horenczyk (2000), studied the expectations of 831 Israeli parents toward the teachers of their adolescent teens and found parents to prioritize teacher help above other factors. Interestingly, mothers appeared to have higher teacher expectations than fathers, and parents' expectations appeared to differ based upon the sex of the child, i.e. parents of girls expected their child(ren) to receive more help from teachers than the parents of boys. On the other hand, Plavšić and Diković's (2016: 121) study of 148 Croatian parents found the characteristics of patience and calmness as the most desired traits in teachers.

While the above-mentioned studies looked at desirable qualities within the teaching profession, they did not distinguish between teachers of various subjects. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of research that examines parental expectations toward the teachers of young learners. As such, by interviewing parents from eight different countries, this study seeks to answer the question: "How do parents of young learners define their ideal language teacher?"

What is known about parents' perceptions of foreign language teachers?

Existing literature on the teaching practices parents desire in language teachers is mostly derived from studies based on parental beliefs about early second language acquisition. For example, in Tekin's (2015: 39–40) study of parental attitudes toward their children's English education in Oman, the researchers found that parents stress the importance of incorporating technology in EFL lessons along with prioritizing reading, dramatic play, and roleplay during language instruction. Likewise, Huynh (2019: 80–84), found Vietnamese parents to value 'fun' elements in language lessons at the primary level, such as songs, games, and play-based learning with more listening exercises and less focus on grammar. The two studies cited above mainly focus on the curriculum and methodology employed by teachers in the language classroom instead of listing the ideal language teacher's attributes. Furthermore, these studies are limited to specific geographical regions. The present study attempts to build upon these localized findings to create a more international picture of what parents want.

More recently, a study conducted by Bozsó and Nagy (2018) identified that pronunciation and native-like speaking ability of language teachers was important to parents of young learners. More specifically, the researchers discovered that the lower the parents' self-reported level of English, the more importance they placed on the language teacher's pronunciation. Additionally, the researchers concluded that parents who enrolled their children in language class prior to pre-school age "attributed less importance to [pronunciation] as compared to parents opting for a start in or after preschool" (Bozsó & Nagy, 2018: 35). These conclusions do not offer a deeper explanation as to why the participants in the study feel native-like pronunciation is so important. Therefore, the authors of this study have recognized the need to explore the underlying factors that govern parental attitudes; factors that can only be explored through a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

What was studied and how?

This study utilized “parent interviews” to obtain rich qualitative data from the participants. The qualitative approach was selected due to its prevalent use in interpreting how participants construct their own realities (Maxwell, 2012). Furthermore, the inductive nature of the qualitative method (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015) allowed the researchers to identify several prevailing themes from the data obtained from the interviews. These themes were then analyzed to form the basis of this article.

Sixteen parents were selected to take part in the study based on convenience sampling. Participants were required to meet the following two criteria to be considered eligible for the study: (1) They must have had at least one child, between the ages 2–13 enrolled in a foreign language class in the previous year. (2) They must agree to a recorded interview via a video-conferencing platform.

In keeping with the stipulations mentioned above, the sixteen interviews consisted of two separate participant interviews from the following eight countries: China, Colombia, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, and Vietnam. These countries were selected because they represented the nationalities of one or more researcher involved in the study.

Besides collecting demographic data, the interview consisted of the following open-ended questions: (1) Describe your ideal language teacher in primary school. (2) What do you hope of your own child(ren)’s teacher in primary school? Reason your perspectives, ideas, wishes, etc. (3) If you had the power and opportunity, how would you change your child(ren)’s language learning at school?

The interviews were conducted in Spring 2020. All interviews were conducted in the participant’s mother tongue to avoid misunderstandings between the researcher and interviewee. Relevant data was then transcribed into English and analysed using content analysis. Once the data was collected, the researchers codified the data in line with established content analysis practises to discover several emergent themes present in the responses of parents (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015). These themes will be discussed in the proceeding section of the article.

How parents define ideal foreign language teachers

Empathy and Socio-emotional Skills

Overwhelmingly, the data from the interviews indicated parents hoped their child(ren)’s language teacher to be fair, empathetic, and teaching socio-emotional skills in tandem with traditional language skills (e.g., listening, reading, writing and speaking). For example, a Chinese mother commented, “The teacher should be more adaptive and give equal chances to every pupil, so that pupils who ‘fall behind’ can improve.” An ideal language teacher should actively provide learning opportunities to students who may be less assertive or at a lower level

academically than their peers. Like Tatar and Horenczyk's (2000) study, which found fairness to be the most important character trait in teachers, the above-mentioned parents also shared this sentiment. This can also be seen in this quote from a South Korean mother regarding the relationship between teachers and students: "It has to be very transversal, connecting with the children so that they can talk a lot, share and do things." As such, the data indicated parental wants for language teachers to go beyond the teaching of the language by coupling language skills with socio-emotional skills in lessons.

Additionally, being sensitive toward student needs and making the students feel as comfortable as possible in the classroom was a prevalent concern amongst participants. Parents from multiple countries felt an ideal language teacher would be able to "get down to the children's level" (South Korean mother) instead of the authoritarian-type teachers they had encountered in their own language classrooms during their primary school years. Perhaps a Japanese mother said it best when she commented "teachers should think of giving an interesting and practical lesson to students, and teachers should not make students feel uncomfortable with English."

Play-based Learning

The presence of play-based learning in the language classroom was another shared concern amongst most respondents. Participants from South Korea and Russia stressed the importance of conducting language activities that mimicked real-life situations and taking the learning experience outside of the school. For example, a South Korean mother commented, "They can go out for field trips and learn languages in real life." Likewise, a Russian mother mirrored this sentiment as evidenced in the following quote: "Meaningful communication should be practiced through the games... I want my child to roleplay being at the supermarket to practice vocabulary." Similar feelings toward play-based learning were found in Omani parents of young learners as described by Tekin (2015: 39).

Interestingly, parents in the present study did not specifically comment on the importance of incorporating technology in language classes. Instead, they recognized the importance of offering a variety of activities to students. For example, a Colombian mother stated, "I hope the teacher can include lots of games and songs in the second language to make it appealing." The idea of entertaining language was important to parents. One Vietnamese mother even suggested games to break up the monotony associated with traditional vocabulary repetition exercises: "Learning has to be fun and encouraging with repetitions of basic vocab through games or different activities." The overall sentiment present in parents' comments can be summarized by a rejection of traditionally teacher-centred audio-lingual and grammar translation teaching methodologies in favor of more student-centred and play-based approaches.

Pronunciation in Target Language

Most parents stressed the importance of clear pronunciation, however, a Turkish mother recognized that extensive knowledge of the target language (e.g., proper syntax, idioms, etc.) is equally important: “A foreign language teacher should speak the language like a native speaker and he/she should have enough knowledge about the foreign language as much as a native speaker has.” Interestingly, this view supposes that native speakers of a language are intrinsically aware of the complexities and grammar rules of their mother tongues (and capable of teaching them to young learners). What qualifies a person as a native speaker in the first place? Do they need to be born in the country where they speak the said language or simply have lived there for an extended period? This sentiment is echoed in this quotation by a South Korean mother: “The ideal for me is that the teacher should be a native speaker. If this is not possible because it is a more difficult requirement to achieve, it should be someone who has been living in that country for at least a year.”

Other parents placed importance on the quality of inputs their children were exposed to in the language classroom, especially when the language teacher did not possess a native-like accent. This belief is evident in the following quote by one Vietnamese mother: “In my opinion, it is both fine for me if my kids are taught by either native teachers or Vietnamese teachers at school as long as they have access to learning inputs that are quality and provide the voices of English native speakers.” Furthermore, some parents felt teachers could be provided additional training to improve their pronunciation as evidenced in the quote by a Colombian father: “I would recommend the school to give all of the teachers more frequent workshops with strategies for teaching a second language; emphasizing on pronunciation. Because when I have seen my daughter facing native English speakers, she seems a bit confused.” Finally, it is interesting to note one Korean mother’s views regarding the importance of exposing her children to native spoken English at a young age. She commented, “I do think that it is important to have contact with native English teachers. In fact, the younger the better because of listening comprehension.” This sentiment was confirmed in Bozsó and Nagy’s (2018) research, which concluded parents of young learners placed a greater importance on pronunciation.

Summary of findings

The present study has found universal similarities in parental definitions of ideal language teachers. Despite different cultural backgrounds, first languages, and geographical locations, most parents involved in the study wanted an empathetic language teacher who utilized play-based learning and possessed native-like pronunciation in the classroom.

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Artikkeliin viittaaminen

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