The Role of School-Parent Relationship in Improving Iraqi EFL Student's Language Skills

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Abstract

Iraqi secondary school teachers should do more to help students improve their English language skills, but they cannot do that alone. More results can be achieved if parents and families work with students and with schools. This paper investigated the relationship between English teachers and students' parents. A sample of six teachers, who volunteered to answer a survey, was used. The findings of the study suggested that the frequency of school-home communication is important but it needs enhancement.

Key Words: *School-Parents Relationship, EFL, Language Skills.*

Introduction

In an attempt to address the problem of underachievement of students in English language classes in Iraqi secondary schools, the researcher highlighted the issue of building a connection between English teachers and students' parents which is one of the important issues that can play an important role in developing students' English language skills. This relationship between teachers and parents require more than mere contact. It needs cooperation and inclusion within the curriculum as well. The purpose of this descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of Iraqi secondary school English teachers with regard to the importance of school-parents relationship and its role in developing students' English language skills, and their feelings toward its importance in the teaching process. This study has significant implications for educational administrators, secondary school English teachers, practicing teachers, and policy makers. Those stakeholders will gain important insight on the importance of school-parents relationship from the present study.

The paper tries to answer the following research questions:

1- How often do Iraqi EFL teachers in secondary schools meet with students' parents?
2- What is the role of School-Parent Relationship in improving EFL students' language skills?

To be aware of the issue discussed in this study, a brief literature review of what is meant by school-parents relationship was presented in the following section.

Literature Review

Students' academic development depends upon the nature of relationships between families and schools because those two entities share the responsibility for helping students to be motivated, acquire knowledge, and develop lifelong skills that will help them be members in their society (Coleman, 1997). The important point here is how to build and sustain this relationship. The importance of building this relationship comes from the differences of perspectives hold by the two entities, because each one might have a different view about students' needs-the thing which might create a conflict and affects the sustainability of the relationship. To establish this relationship there are many steps that should be followed by both school and parents. For example, the school should introduce school activities and summer programs for parents, design a schedule for meeting with parents and let the parents be aware of that schedule to share the responsibility of following up on the progress of their kids, and plan activities with specific roles for families and parents in them.

Parents on their turns should try to know their children's school and their classroom routine, decide a way of communicating with their teachers (by phone, face to face, or any other means), and begin their communication with the school and teachers as soon as possible (Rice, 2006).

Building the relationship: where to start

Respect

The first point that the school should consider when thinking of ways to strengthen the relationship with students' parents is respect. Building respect leads to the creation of trust, which values both parents, teachers, and the school. This trust is the key to open the window for discovering students' needs; because the family is the main source of information to what the student needs to be successful. This step is an indirect message for students to be part of a larger community. In such way of cooperation, both poles – school and family – will fulfils the aim of the educational system which "has always been to give every generation possibilities to develop their competence for a social life." (Lea, 2012, p.107).

Responsibility

Building trust and cooperating with parents proves that both parties have mutual interest in caring for students' success. This mutual interest leads to the second important point in school-parents relationship, which is responsibility. This responsibility includes students' progress in academic, students' attitudes and behavior, their attendance, and graduation rates (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). But this responsibility taken by both sides does not mean that school and parents blame each other for the stumbling parts of the educational process, but instead they work together to make it work. We have to add to schools responsibility the sustainability of the connection with parents in regular communication and creating several opportunities to involve families in the educational process.

Barriers to parents' involvement

Van Velsor and Orozco (2007) discussed barriers of low-income immigrant parent involvement in their study. Those barriers are so applicable to the case of Iraqi parents because the majority of Iraqi families can be classified as low-income families. Those barriers include:

Demographic barriers

Parents might have several jobs or might work for long hours and have no time to follow up with schools and be involved in cooperative activities (Benson& Martin, 2003; Plunkett &Bámaca-Gómez, 2003). Limited education, caring for elders, and other responsibilities might be some of the reasons to keep parents away from any relationship with schools as well.

Teachers' Perceptions

In several cases teachers are the reason for lack of communication with parents. They think of parents – especially those with very simple education – as a source of negative effect on the educational process (Konzal, 2001; Ramirez, 1999). In Iraq, teachers do not believe in the effectiveness of involving parents and families in the teaching process. They commit meetings with parents just to state the status of students in the educational process, or just to get rid of one of the obligations of formal school meetings with parents. All of this results in a huge gap with the real life of students. Parents, as any human beings, feel when they are accepted or not; that is why most of them avoid such meetings. I think many elements contribute to such perceptions from the part of teachers – whether economic, political, or even those related to the outside appearance and elegancy of parents – because in the 1980s and early 1990s the situation was totally different and there was kind of association between teachers, schools, and parents.

Method

Participants

The researcher used convenience sampling procedure to select participants. The participants in this study included six secondary school English language teachers. The sample was predominantly Iraqi teachers, and participants ranged in age from (27) to (47) years. The mean age of male teachers was (27.00), and that of females was (41.00) (SD = 5.831). Participants were obtained from three schools from AL-Risafa District and one school from Al-Karkh District in Baghdad. Out of the six teachers who participated, (83) percent were female while 1 percent was male.

The mean of years of teaching for the six participants was (16.67) years. (33.3) percent of the respondents stated that they were teaching at girls' secondary school, while (66.7) percent of them were teachingat boys' secondary schools (See Table 1).

Table 1

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How many students do you have in your classroom?	6	30	50	38.50	7.450
How do you meet with students' parents?	6	1	2	1.50	.548
Age	6	27	47	38.67	7.737
Gender	6	1	2	1.83	.408
Graduation	6	1989	2012	1998.33	8.733
Years of Teaching	6	2	26	16.67	9.543
Type of school	6	1	2	1.67	.516
Valid N (listwise)	6				

Instrumentation

The researcher created a survey as an instrument for this study to investigate the perceptions of Iraqi secondary school English language teachers regarding the importance of school-parents relationship and its role in developing students' English language skills. The survey had 15 items with a 4-point Likert scale for items 1-3, a 5-point Never-Weekly or More scale for items 4-6, a 2-point Yes/No scale for items 7 and 8, and a two short answer items (9 and 10). The final items (11-15) are related to the demographics, which are: age, gender, graduation, number of years in profession, and type of school. The scales are as follows:

- Items 1-3: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.
- Items 4-6: 1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice a year, 3 = Every few months, 4 = Monthly, 5 = Weekly or more.

Items 1-3 measured the perspective of teachers towards the role of families in students' performance in language classes, Items 4-6 measured the relationship of schools with students' parents and families, and items 7 and 9 assessed views of teachers towards the role of parents in improving the process of teaching/learning.

Procedures

The survey was administered by phone. The administration of the instrument began with a verbal explanation of the research, an introduction about the survey, and reading the items so the participant can answer them. After survey completion, surveys were coded and analyzed using the software package SPSS.

Results

Research Question 1: How often do Iraqi EFL teachers in secondary schools meet with students' parents?
For this question, a calculation of frequencies was reported. Three items of the survey were used to answer this question. The first item asked participants about the number of times they meet with their students' parents. Results indicated that (16.7) percent of participants never meet with students' parents, (66.7) percent of participants meet with them once or twice a year, and (16.7) percent of participants conduct parental meetings every few months (See Table 2).

Table 2

How often do you meet with students' parents?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Once or twice a year	4	66.7	66.7	83.3
	Every few months	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

The second item asked participants about how often they visit students' neighborhoods. Results indicated that (100) percent of the participants do not visit their students' neighborhoods. The last item was asking about how often participants visit their students' families. Again results showed that (100) percent of the participants do not visit their students' families (See Table 3& 4).

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Table 3

How often do you visit your students' neighborhoods?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	6	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4

How often do you visit your students' families?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	6	100.0	100.0	100.0

Research Question 2: What is the role of School-Parent Relationship in improving EFL students' language skills? For this research question, a calculation of mean scores and frequencies were reported (See Table 5). Items 1-3 and 7-8 were used to answer this question. Items 1-3 addressed the importance of meeting with students' parents. The average survey score on the importance of meeting with students' parents, represented by item 1, was (3.67) out of 6 with a standard deviation of (.516). The results indicated that English language teachers believe of the importance of meeting with students' parents. Item 2 indicated a moderate position of teachers concerning the role of parental meetings in helping teachers understand ways of improving their lesson plans. The average score was (3.33) out of 6 with standard deviation of (.516). Whereas the average score for the role of families in supporting the process of teaching was (3.17) out of 6 with a standard deviation of (.753).

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
It is important to meet with students' parents	6	3	4	3.67	.516
Meeting with students' parents help teachers understand ways of improving their lesson plans	6	3	4	3.33	.516
Meeting with parents activates the role of families in supporting the process of teaching	6	2	4	3.17	.753
Valid N (listwise)	6				

Items 7 and 8 were also used to answer the second research question. Item 7 asked about the involvement of students' parents in the process of teaching. Results stated that (83.3) percent of participants do not involve students' parents in their teaching of English as a foreign language while only (16.7) percent of them had parents as part of their teaching process (See Table 6).

Table 6

Do you involve your students' parents in any way in the EFL teaching?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	5	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Yes	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Item 8 asked about teachers' knowledge of students' background. Participants' answers showed that (83.3) percent of them were not familiar with their students' backgrounds, and only (16.7) had that knowledge (See Table 7).

Table 7

Do you know all your students' cultural background?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	5	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Yes	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Discussion

Previous research suggested that parental cooperation may be a useful construct for students' academic success. Accurately measuring teachers' perceptions of parental involvement in the teaching process and lesson planning is the key to furthering the research in such topic. The present study investigated the perceptions of six teachers concerning the relationship with students' parents and the effect of such relationship in developing students' English language skills. A survey was developed to involve the following concepts: importance of meeting with students' parents, frequencies of parental meetings, parents' involvement and its role in developing lesson plans, and teachers' familiarity with students' backgrounds. Depending on the results gained from this study, it was clear that there is a lack of communication between teachers and parents. This gap resulted partly from the systems of the schools of the teachers who filled out the survey because they set up group parental meetings twice a year. Teachers, on the other hand, had no connection with students because they know nothing about their cultural background and did not visit their neighborhoods or families.

This cut among the three basic poles of the educational process – family, school, and teachers – will be reflected negatively on the curriculum which will be so distant from students' needs and has nothing to do with their real life practices. Another important factor noticed from the responses of the participants was the large number of students each of them had. This is, in fact, a very critical issue which is badly affecting building a community in the classroom. With such large number of students, it is difficult for teachers to meet with every student's parent. In the case of the sample of this study, it might look that the schools' policy in conducting group meetings with parents is efficient, but this technique is in fact not helping since those meetings can introduce parents to the programs and policies of schools but will not contribute to the academic development of students.

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Appendix

School-Parents' Relationship and EFL Students

Please answer the following items:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is important to meet with students' parents.	O	O	O	O
Meeting with students' parents help teachers understand ways of improving their lesson plans.	O	O	O	O
Meeting with parents activates the role of families in supporting the process of teaching.	O	O	O	O

Item	Never	Once or twice a year	Every few months	Monthly	Weekly or more
How often do you meet with students' parents?	O	O	O	O	O
How often do you visit your students' neighborhoods?	O	O	O	O	O
How often do you visit your students' families?	O	O	O	O	O

Item	No	Yes
Do you involve your students' parents in any way in the EFL teaching?	O	O
Do you know all your students' cultural backgrounds?	O	O

How many students do you have in your classroom?_____

How do you meet with students' parents?
O In group   O Individually

Demographics

How old are you? _____ years old

What is your gender?   O Male O Female

When did you graduate? _____ (e.g. 2004)

How many years have you been in the profession of teaching? _____years.

Where do you teach? O Girls' secondary school O Boys' secondary school

Thank You!
Thank you for taking my survey. Your responses are very important to the study.