

# Young EFL Learners' Difficulties in Getting English Input after Class: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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**Abstract:** Input plays a significant role in second language acquisition, however, young EFL learners' input at school is limited. Numbers of studies regarding the improvement of classroom teaching have been carried out, and this research will put focus on children's English input beyond the classroom, mainly at home. In-depth interviews were conducted to examine the experiences and perceptions of three families (three primary school students and their parents), and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore Chinese young EFL learners' difficulties in attaining input at home. The findings were that these families mainly encountered three difficulties, which included absence of English guidance at home, strong dependence on school and dilemma in English material selection.

**Keywords:** Young EFL learner, input hypothesis, English input at home, IPA.

## 1. Introduction

There's a consensus on the importance of learning English, which is one of the most universally used languages. It also plays an important role in China's education system, and is of great concern to both educators and parents in China. In terms of how to learn English, numerous voices can be heard, including but not being limited to skill building hypothesis, comprehensible output hypothesis and input hypothesis.

Many researchers strived to prove the validity of skill building hypothesis, which claims that learners aiming to acquire a second or foreign language should start with learning and then applying the grammatical rules consciously, and that correcting errors made in output is a key step in the process of language acquisition [1]. However, through detailed analysis of several researches, Krashen argued that these studies only showed that "grammar teaching has a peripheral effect" and even highlighted the limits of grammar instruction [2].

The comprehensible output (CO) hypothesis states that learners acquire language when their utterances arrive at a correct form after multiple failures and retry [2]. However, "pushing" students to talk has been proved to be the primary reason of their anxiety [3], and a higher degree of anxiety or a high affective filter is an obstacle in the progress of second language acquisition, because it would keep input out of reaching the "language acquisition device" [4].

On the contrast, getting exposed to more comprehensible input seems to be a more reasonable and pleasant strategy for acquiring a foreign or second language [4]. A further study of the input hypothesis states that "not all comprehensible input is of equal value", and "Optimal Input" should be not only comprehensible, but also compelling, rich and abundant [5]. This research suggests that there are two sorts of input satisfying the four mentioned features: 1) stories and listening-stories, 2) reading, especially fiction. In Tsang's research, language input is classified into two modes, reading (written input) and listening (spoken input), and watching English videos is considered as a mode of listening, which is

argued to be of specific value for language acquisition [6]. However, there actually is a distinction between listening to English audios and watching English videos, especially in the term of children's language acquisition, and the former isn't as attractive as the latter for young learners. That's because, without sufficient comprehension aiding supplementation including "drawing pictures, brief translation, and the use of context" [7], unimodal input (audio-only) is usually incomprehensible for young learners. In this context, many researchers made efforts to find out potential benefits of audio-visual (AV) input for L2 learners, for example, Muñoz points out that images involved in videos foster learner's understanding from both semantic and contextual aspects [8].

Since Krashen's input hypothesis came out, criticisms and controversies have come with it. For example, many researchers pointed out that the "i+1" hypothesis, which was "the next structure learners were ready to acquire" [9], was an untestable construct [10]. Later, Nation suggested that having a command of 95%–98% of the vocabulary in a text was more ideal for learners to read [11]. These criticisms against the input hypothesis are reasonable to some extent, however, until now, no research demonstrates the wrongness of its core view, which is that input is still the key for language acquisition.

Although learning English language is of great concern in China, and Krashen's hypothesis and further researches show the significance of input in language acquisition, a phenomenon arises that a large percentage of Chinese primary school students can't get access to enough input, and it's not exclusive in China. Many researches show evidently that language input at school is limited both in quantity and quality [8], and implications for language teaching based on Krashen's theories still look "outlandish" because "language acquisition tends to be neglected in both teacher education and professional development" [12].

Considering the limitations of English input at school and the impossibility to change China's current education system in the near future, the researcher aims to explore whether it's feasible for Chinese families to help children get access to input after class, mainly at home, and what are the difficulties

and challenges for kids and their parents to put it into practice.

## 2. Methodology

This research applies interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore three families' experience and difficulties in children's English input at home.

### 2.1. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The theoretical underpinnings of IPA come from three philosophical domains: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Firstly, a successful IPA should be both phenomenological and hermeneutic. That means researchers are expected to firstly focus on examining participants' accounts of their personal experience, and at the same time, interpretive endeavor of both participants and researchers is necessarily involved to explain a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, the idiographic feature of IPA embodies in efforts made to sensitively conduct an interview with a particular group of people having relatively similar experience, and to do detailed and insightful analysis, which

begins with an examination of each case and then moves to exploration of similarities and differences across the cases [13].

This study's aim is to explore Chinese children's difficulties in getting English input after class, which calls for careful selection of participants sharing similar characteristics, in-depth and semi-structured interviews guided by open and exploratory questions, and detailed and nuanced analyses of the participants' accounts. This suggests that the current study fits well with IPA.

### 2.2. Participants

Participants in this study were three families, each including a kid and his/her parent. To make the research questions meaningful, a fairly homogeneous sample was selected, and kids involved 1) are Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learner, studying at a public elementary school in Shenzhen, China, 2) are at the age of 8 to 11, 3) rarely get English input after class, 4) live with parents who don't have a good command of the English language. Children's and their parents' basic information are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Basic information of children and their parents

Name	Gender	Age	Parent's English level
Allen	M	8	B
Howell	M	9	C
Nicole	F	10	C

A=having attended some English tests, like CET-4/6 (College English Test Band 4 or 6), TEM-4/8 (Test for English Majors-Band 4 or 8), IELTS or TOFEL, and get certificates or good scores; B=having no English-related certificate or scores, but can provide simple instruction for children's English study; C=can't instruct children's English study at all.

### 2.3. Data Collection

This research applied semi-structured interviews, during which kids and parents were interviewed separately. Before the interviews, the researcher informed participants of potentially covered questions and that their names would be changed to preserve anonymity. After gaining their consent to subsequent audio records and verbatim extracts, the researcher conducted interviews in Mandarin, which is participants' first language. Interviews were guided by two different predesigned schedules for children and parents respectively, and the questions were "open not closed" and "exploratory not explanatory", which could help highlight the "perceptions and views of participants" [13].

During the interviews, kids were encouraged to recall their experience of gaining English input after class and feelings towards that. Besides, one open question included was: Which one do you prefer, reading English books, listening to English stories or watching English videos?

Parents were also asked to tell their efforts made to help children's after-class English input, like reading stories, selecting books, finding out English videos. More importantly, other questions set for parents focused on probing reasons behind children's lack of optimal English input and parents' difficulties in guiding kids. Questions included but not limited to: 1) How did you get access to comprehensible and compelling English material for kids? 2) Are there any other difficulties in helping children get English input?

## 3. Results and Discussion

Through demonstrating "what the data are like" and "what they all mean" [13], four difficulties will be described and analyzed, including *absence of English guidance at home*, *strong dependence on school* and *dilemma in English material selection*.

### 3.1. Difficulty 1: Absence of English Guidance

The purposively selected participants share one characteristic, which is that children's parents are not good at the English language, and this feature leads to the first reason behind their children's difficulties in getting English input at home. Even if parents want to help children with their after-class English input, they are unable to provide guidance.

#### Extract 1

Nicole's mother: "I feel powerless when talking about kid's English education, because I have no idea about this foreign language..."

#### Extract 2

Howell's mother: "I have a friend who can speak English fluently. I know she usually reads English books, and sometimes reads with her child...Compared with her, I'm so bad at it."

The extracts give the clue that parents tend to attribute kids' lack of English input at home to their incapacity of the English language.

### 3.2. Difficulty 2: Strong Dependence on School

Firstly, classes seem to be the main source of children's English input. During the interviews with children, their memories of English input were usually related to their school.

### Extract 3

Nicole: “My English teacher occasionally played English videos during time for individual study, like *The Lion King* and *Peppy Pig*... I rarely watch English videos at home...I will be allowed to watch TV if I finish my tasks, but I never found any English program there.”

In consideration of children’s immaturity in expressing themselves, the researcher asked children whether it was at home or school after their describing recent experience of attaining English input, and it turned out that, in most cases, the answer was “at school”. This indirectly illustrates these children’s lack of English input at home and reliance on school.

Secondly, the excessive dependence on school embodies in parents’ faith in test score, which is seen as the primary and even sole evaluating indicator of children’s English level. Surprisingly, all interviewed parents will pay less attention to children’s after-class English input if they gain high scores in English tests at school.

### Extract 4

Howell’s mother: “My son’s English score ranks top 5 in his class, but his does not so well at other subjects, so I pay more attention on Math and Chinese.”

Thirdly, teachers’ recommendation serves as the authority for parents to buy English books and download English audios or videos. But according to participants’ accounts, for some reason, teachers has not asked students to read English books at home recently.

### Extract 5

Allen’s father: “Years earlier, teachers at school recommended some English books, but recently, nothing... So I rarely buy English books now, because I don’t know which one is suitable.”

It also struck to Nicole that her English teacher had not given any advice about after-school reading for a long time and her mother didn’t buy new English books this year.

Three above aspects illustrate that kids and parents are overly reliant on school. It can be a common phenomenon in lots of Chinese families where parents are not good at the English language. It’s inevitable and reasonable for this group of parents to seek for outside assistance, however, children’s school is not the only “savior”.

## 3.3. Difficulty 3: Dilemma in English Material Selection

As was mentioned in *Introduction*, English input is classified simply into reading input and listening input in Tsang’s research, and other researchers highlight the specific value of audio-visual input. Given this, this study categorizes English input into three types: reading input, listening input and watching input.

### 3.3.1. Reading Material Selection

Reading input refers mainly to English books of diverse genres. During interviews, reading input was the most discussed type, and interestingly, all three kids encounter one situation that there are English books not read at home, as they are too hard to be understood.

### Extract 6

Nicole: “I have a set of *Dog Man*, which was given by my best friends who’s studying in Hong Kong. She loves it, but it’s too hard for me!”

Children’s complaints reflect parents’ dilemma in selecting English books. It’s not easy for parents to make them satisfy Krashen’s “i+1” structure, in which “i” stands for the content children have mastered, and “i+1” represents the next structure to acquire [9]. Although guidance is given when purchasing English books to parents pick up suitable books for kids according their ages or grades, the results are not always satisfactory.

### Extract 7

Howell’s mother: “I selected some books labeled “suitable for third graders”, and my son chose the one named *Nate the Great* out of his interest. But disappointedly, when books arrived, it turned out that he couldn’t understand them quite well.”

### Extract 8

Nicole’s mother: “I once gave my daughter a Lexile test, but the result was “pre”. She’s about to be a fourth grader, but her English level is just the same as kindergarten children! Her English scores rank at least top 20% at school, so I’m confused... Perhaps there is something wrong with this application, but Lexile is a foreign system, and I don’t know how to find the website.”

The Lexile system can evaluate both children’s reading capacity and the difficulty of texts, thus it can help readers to find a comprehensible English book. Among three involved parents, only Nicole’s mother knows Lexile, one of the most scientific approaches to match students with appropriate books. She used an English learning APP to do the test, but was frightened by the result. This illustrates that to identify the English level that a kid has reached is not a simple work, and even if there are some effective methods, not all parents know and can get access to them.

### 3.3.2. Listening Material Selection

Listening input refers to audio English material. Without comprehension-aiding supplementations, this kind of input is less welcomed by young language learners.

### Extract 9

Nicole: “I prefer to picture books to audios. At least there are images in books, which can help me understand the stories... Listening to English audios, occasionally reminds me of boring listening tests at school.”

### Extract 10

Howell’s mother: “I once downloaded an English learning app where audios were available, but he showed no interest in them.”

### 3.3.3. Watching Material Selection

Watching input refers to any audio-visual material, including English videos, movies, cartoons and etc. This type of English input, unsurprisingly, is the favorite for children involved. Lindgren and Muñoz’s research reported that 800 young learners got more exposure to L2 from TV or the Internet than through reading, which revealed the potential

benefits of audio-visual input<sup>[14]</sup>. Given children's preference to watching input and its specific value, there is still something hindering children's contact with it.

The first obstacle is that not all parents can make full use of online learning material. On one hand, they are not familiar with every detail of how to find comprehensible and compelling input for kids. On the other hand, they show a lack of initiative.

#### Extract 11

Howell's mother: "There are some English videos in Tencent Video (a video software), like *Dora* and *Peppy Pig*, which my son has watched when he was little... I know there are attractive English videos in other platforms, like Bilibili and Douyin, but I never try them out."

Besides popular apps, parents know little about how to find English input. For example, no parents mentioned online libraries or particular websites where audio-visual books and videos are available without charge. According to the interviews, parents involved have been netizens for a time long enough to know well about the Internet, and if they put "how to find English learning materials online" into the search box, thousands of answers will pop up, but they never did it.

Secondly, the digitalization of society facilitates children's exposure to L2<sup>[8]</sup>, however, electronic devices like smart phones and computers, though serving as the carriers of English input, are seen as a double-edged sword whose harms are overwhelming from many parents' points of view. For example, fixing eyes on the screen may lead to children's shortsightedness, and it's inevitable to be exposed to some misleading messages, which might be violent, vulgar or superstitious.

#### Extract 12

Howell: "My parents don't allow me to use phones, so I rarely watch videos at home, let alone English ones... They said it's harmful to my eyesight."

#### Extract 13

Nicole's mother: "My daughter once used her father's phone to do tasks in an English learning app, but when finished, she wasted long time on browsing Douyin (a short videos platform in China) ... Even adults can get addicted, let alone children, and what if there were something unsuitable for kids..."

In conclusion, the third difficulty is reflected in three aspects: the difficulty in getting comprehensible material, the difficulty in making full use of online resources and the difficulty in making use of electronic devices in a better way.

## 4. Conclusion and Implications

This study applied interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and examined three young EFL learners and their parents. Through trying to make sense of their experience and perception, the results show that there are three main difficulties of particular families in China which have been discussed above. Parents' weakness in EFL directly

results in the absence of English guidance at home, thus the young learners rely on their school to attain English input. At the same time, parents give too much attention on test scores and show great faith in teacher's recommendation. On the one hand, strong dependence on school is an obstacle for learners to get English input beyond the classroom, especially when children's performance at school is passable and when teachers show neglect of after-school input. On the other hand, this finding highlights the important role of school in EFL learners' after-class input. If parents can be informed of various useful online tools, with exploration based on children's interest and language level, there will be a great possibility to solve these families' dilemma in English material selection.

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