

Mealtime Talk as a Context of Learning: A Multiple Case Study of Australian Chinese Parents' Interaction with Their Preschool Aged Children at Dinner Table

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Abstract : Research identifies that mealtime talk can be a significant learning context that provides children with rich experiences to foster their language and cognitive development. Middle-classed parents create an extended learning discourse for their children through sophisticated vocabulary, narrative and explanation genres at dinner table. However, mealtime opportunities vary with some parents having little interaction with their children and some parents focusing on directive of children's behaviors. This study investigated five Chinese families' parent-child interaction during mealtime that was rarely reported in the literature. The five families differ in terms of their living styles. Three families are from professional background where both mothers the fathers work in Australian companies and both of them present at dinner time. The other two families own business. The mothers are housemakers and the fathers are always absent at dinner time due to their busy business life. Employing case study method, the five Chinese families' parent-child interactions at dinner table were recorded using a video camera. More than 3000 clauses were analyzed with the framework of 'systems of clause complexing' from systemic functional linguistic theory. The finding shows that mothers played a critical role in the interaction with their children by initiating most conversations. The three mothers from professional background tended to use more language in extending and expanding pattern that is beneficial for children's language development and high level of thinking (e.g., logical thinking). The two house making mothers' language focused more on the directive of their children's social manners and dietary behaviors. The fathers though seemed to be less active, contributing to the richness of the conversation through their occasional props such as asking open questions or initiating a new topic. In general, the families from professional background were more advantaged in providing learning opportunities for their children at dinner table than the families running business were. The home experiences of Chinese children is an important topic in research due to the rapidly increasing number of Chinese children in Australia and other English speaking countries. Such research assist educators in the education of Chinese children with more awareness of Chinese children experiences at home that could be very unlike the settings in English schools. This study contributes to the research in this area through the analysis of language in parent-child interaction during mealtime, which is very different from previous research that mainly investigated Chinese families through survey and interview. The finding of different manners in language use between the professional families and business families has implication for the understanding of the variation of Chinese children's home experiences that is influenced not only by parents' socioeconomic status but their lifestyles.

Keywords : Chinese children, Chinese parents, mealtime talk, parent-child interaction

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