

# **How can parents facilitate their children to learn English as a second language?**

**Cecilia Chu**

In a city like Hong Kong where English is a second language and a major subject in schools, school teachers may be asked by some parents in Parents' Day: 'What can I do to help my kids learn English at home?' If you are a parent, or a teacher of English, or anyone who is interested in helping students practise English outside the classroom, I can offer the following ideas for your consideration.

## **1. Be a good model and learn with children**

Be a good model. You can only make your children believe in English learning when you learn and practise English yourself. Try to review school work with the children and understand the problems they face with. Try to show your understanding of their problems and your eagerness and interest in using and learning English yourself to the children. You may also work with the children on information search on some English topics. Don't forget to negotiate with them for a schedule of work and play.

## **2. Establishing a language rich environment at home**

I remember I happened to find a book on Chinese Kung Fung on a book shelf at home when I was about 8 years old. That book belonged to my father. My curiosity drove me to flip through the pages and the book was an eye opener for me indeed. In fact, language input is important to language learning. With

rich reading materials around and in a place where reading materials are at their fingertips, children will likely pick a book whenever any interesting titles catch their eyes. Reading facilitates a reader's vocabulary learning, and enriches his/her knowledge of different authors and writing styles. Try to provide a friendly setting for English learning: hiring internet service, subscribing to English magazines, and buying books: fiction and non-fiction and various learning kits and resources. If possible, families may set up a learning circle or a library among themselves. Member families may comprise children's classmates, neighbours, friends and /or relatives. After the kids have finished with their books at home, they can swap the books with other children. They may play with some English learning kits together.

### 3. Vocabulary learning is important to effective reading, writing, speaking and listening skills

Words for reading, writing, speaking and listening are like bricks for a house. Vocabulary, in other words, is essential, and requires a large amount for self-expression and communication. Children may learn and absorb different kinds of vocabulary through two ways. One is incidental learning, and another is intentional learning. Incidental learning means that learning is a part of daily life. For example, they can absorb and expand your word bank by reading notices in the public transport, in public places; by watching movies and listening to the radio; by speaking with English speaking personnel in social functions.

Intentional learning is an organized and systematic way of learning. Parents may help the children to set targets for a vocabulary building plan. They may aim at learning 20 new words in a week, including the spelling, pronunciation, basic meaning and the usage of the words. It is practical to keep note books or open a WORD file for new words. Try to work with the kids together to do the

new entries every day and encourage them to use as many new words as possible in their daily communication in English, e .g. English composition and e-mails to friends. Of course, parents should also use the words in the note book themselves.

#### 4. It is happier and more useful to work in groups

Language is a tool for communication and interaction. Try to extend the function of the learning circle (in 2) to another level. Children may learn more and better in groups. Learning is more fun. Schools' Parents-Teachers Association may help coordinate parents and form such a 'fun club for their students. Through regular gatherings during festivals or for birthday celebration, parents may arrange English games for children to play in a spontaneous and pleasant atmosphere.

I will write more on some English learning activities in the home domain later.

Cecilia Chu

<http://www//eltforward.com>