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'I don't ever want to leave this room' benefits of researching 'with' children

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This paper considers an alternative perspective to complement the existing body of research in child EFL/ESL. This perspective assumes that children's views are different from those of adults, and since they are 'experts' of their own lives, it is worthwhile for adults to explore innovative ways in which children's unique experiences and perspectives can be uncovered.

The paper reports on the two authors' joint research projects where children have been involved in various participatory activities. Using short extracts taken from conversations between an adult researcher and the children, we attempt to illustrate some of the benefits of researching 'with' children. The data indicates that children exercise their agency by shaping the research activities in their own ways, making spontaneous comments, asking unexpected questions and selecting topics they find relevant. We also consider some of the challenges involved in this type of research, but overall recommend that working with children 'collaboratively' in research projects is an excellent learning experience for teachers, researchers and children alike.

Introduction

Teaching English to young learners has by now become a global phenomenon. All over the world, more and more children are learning English in preschools, primary schools as well as private institutes. Many countries have recently opted for lowering the age at which children start compulsory English because of pressure from parents and the widespread belief that it is better to start learning a second/foreign language as early as possible. Reflecting this expansion, research into young learners has also grown rapidly over the last few decades, although the majority of research is still conducted in ESL contexts and much less research has targeted EFL contexts.

If we examine the existing research literature closely, we find that the majority of the published studies are experimental in design, often ing on isolated aspects of learning such as task-based learning, or strategy use (Mackey et al 2007, or Butler and Lee 2006). These studies often compare groups of children, sometimes of different ages, and an oftencited problem is that the tasks and tests used can disadvantage younger children. Younger children have less experience with formal tests and tasks used in this type of research, and their performance is therefore often compromised. Qualitative and ethnographic studies on the other hand employ indepth- descriptions to highlight the complexities of individual learner trajectories and explore the roles that individual variables such as identity or motivation play (Hawkins 2005, Toohey 2000). Overall, to

our knowledge, all of this research, both in ESL and EFL contexts, share one important feature: the research questions are always conceived from adult perspectives, satisfying adult curiosity and motivated by an adult agenda. This, of course, is not at all surprising or unexpected. However, as a result, an interesting question arises about the meaning of 'child perspectives' and 'children's voices', and in general about the status of children in ESL/EFL research.

The aim of this paper is to argue that in order to complement the current body of research it is beneficial to explore an alternative perspective which priorities children's own agenda and concerns. Children's concerns and agenda can be incorporated into research in different ways at different levels, representing different opportunities on a continuum from more modest involvement to levels where children actually conduct their own research. While a truly child-centred research project will start with questions and problems the children themselves initiate as important or relevant, in practical terms in a context where the whole idea is new, it is more realistic to embark on a project that is adult –initiated but from the very start attempts to involve the children in shaping the project by allowing a range of different ways in which they can contribute.

The social child

Scholarly interest in children can be traced back to the middle ages but serious empirical research only dates back to the beginning of the 20th century when the establishment of compulsory education meant that large numbers of children were suddenly available for research. Developmental psychology was born as a research field interested in describing children in terms of average achievements, standard performances and agerelated abilities as they progressed through school grades. Such an interest in agerelated competence and universal development is traditionally associated with conceptualiations of children who are vulnerable, lacking knowledge and experience, i.e. 'incomplete becomings'. The underlying assumption is that it is not worth asking children about their views because they are untrustworthy, so instead, researchers, teachers, parents and other adult figures of authority need to provide evidence based on observational and experimental data. When conducting such research, children are asked to engage in different tasks and tests and their performance is interpreted by adults alone, according to adult criteria. In many ways there is nothing surprising or wrong with such an approach, but recently, an alternative movement, called the 'New

Sociology of Childhood' (James et al 1998) suggested that children's status in research needs to be reconsidered.

Essentially, this new approach suggests that children are capable of providing useful and reliable insights about their own lives, and they can be resourceful and knowledgeable especially concerning their own experiences. These new ideas have far-reaching implications on all research that is conducted with children. Researchers working in this tradition appreciate the fact that children's experiences and views are likely to be different from adults, and want to uncover children's own perspectives (Alderson 2000). In this type of research new roles have been assigned to children as 'active participants' and 'co-researchers' representing different degrees of involvement. In some contexts this may mean children are invited to contribute their ideas about what aspects of the classroom to explore together with the teacher, or they may offer their views about research tools designed by the teacher, while in other contexts, where children and teachers are more accustomed to working this way, it may be the case that the children are ready to decide on their own projects and make their own decisions about how to carry them out.

We understand that there is a concern that children obviously do not write up or publish research in the same way as adult academics do. But we use the term 'co-researcher' to signify that children are more than just active participants and informants that adults listen to in order to develop appropriate and child-centred projects. Going beyond the role of an active participant, children can be involved in a way that their perspectives and contributions have the potential to shape/alter the originally adult-conceived project, bring a new angle, and in some cases they can even come up with a new focus for a possible project. Children can suggest research questions, or negotiate/alter/evaluate research tools, they can also make sense of the data, and in some cases they have been successful in writing their own reports which adult academics have incorporated into their own writing. Of course, ultimately, it is all adult controlled and all research is representation, but children can, if encouraged, take a more influential role than just act as informants to help adults conceive of child-friendly projects from an adult point of view. Working with children in this way takes time and initial projects need to be more modest, gradually building up to opportunities for the children to take more control.

When children are invited to contribute views, ideas or concerns, much of this happens

in conversations with adults. Rather than relying on standard interviews, so-called participatory activities (O'Kane 2008) can help allow children to express their views relying on a variety of different modes of expression including drawings, photos, drama, music, or storytelling. One attractive feature of participatory activities is that they capture views expressed in creative ways, not relying on verbal contributions alone. No matter what methodology is selected, however, within this new sociology of childhood approach, the research tools need to be carefully negotiated with the children. In fact one of the most important factors in research with children as joint researchers is the quality of the trust and the relationship between adults and children. The negotiation of views, interpretations and perspectives throughout the process will have to be addressed (Kuchah and Pinter 2012). Adults need to work on developing 'reflexivity', the ability to step back and reflect on the whole process, as well as on their own and the children's interpretations of what is going on.

The aim of the rest of this paper is to demonstrate that despite the fact that this approach comes with many new challenges and ethical/methodological dilemmas, the benefits gained by both children and their researchers (including teacher researchers) make these efforts worthwhile.

The benefits of researching 'with' children

Over the years we have been involved in a number of projects where we invited children to become active participants in our research both in the UK and in Iran, using various participatory activities (Pinter and Zandian 2012). Because space here does not allow us to give full account of all our research, we would like to introduce some data to illustrate how children (all aged between 10 and 12) in different contexts have contributed to, benefited from, and engaged actively with the research projects. In particular, we focus on how children make their own choices by suggesting what the focus of the discussion should be, or express views that reflect their priorities within the framework of a specific participatory activity or group interview. In all cases below, we noticed that the children were not just responding to the activities but they volunteered additional concerns, comments, or questions, which were unexpected and fresh to our adult eyes. Grover (2004:84) suggests that it is important to notice and take note of these unexpected, often unusual comments because these represent 'raw, highly informative and socially significant' responses. We feel that it is exactly these fresh and

raw comments and questions that children offer spontaneously that have the potential to reflect views that are not reflective of ideas and language directly appropriated from adults, parents or teachers.

In both contexts, the children were using English as their strongest language, although in the Iranian context they sometimes code-switched between English and Persian. It is important to let children choose what language they prefer to use. In most monolingual contexts this is an easy decisionit needs to be the L1but with bilingual children this is something to be negotiated. In fact in some of our work with bilingual learners it was clear that children had their own unique reasons to want to respond in one language rather than another (Kuchah and Author (1) 2012). Ideally the adult researcher should be fluent in both languages in order to accommodate children's spontaneous codeswitching.

Setting the agenda

In one of our projects that we conducted with children in the UK about their language learning experiences, we prepared a range of different elicitation tools to encourage the children to share their views and opinions. These included watching short language classroom clips on 'Youtube' to see which class they might like to join and why. Also, we asked them to design one or two power oint slides about their ideal language lesson so that they could share their thoughts and ideas in the group. We planned to focus on their ideas about what they already knew in the two languages, but interestingly, even though the children engaged with the planned activities, they quickly selected the topic of 'good teachers' as their own focus for discussion. They suggested that the biggest difference between what they knew in the two languages was related to the differences between their two teachers. They expressed very explicitly their views about what qualities they felt good teachers should have. The children had sensible and sophisticated ideas about good teachers, good lessons and good teaching, and yet it is clear that no one ever asked their opinion at school (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

Extract 1: Good teachers

R: What do you think is the most boring part of the Mandarin class?

S1: Well, some teachers even when it's a boring subject know how to make it kind of fun, but she just like (xx) does the normal stuff, make us listen and emm (xx) students just lose

concentration because we are not really having a good time, we are just doing stuff we don't want to do.

S2: She has just got a PowerPoint that she always has and is always ALWAYS (x) sticks to the PowerPoint and if someone asks a question and it's not related then she won't answer it.

S1: Because she is a nice person you really don't want to say this class is rubbish you can't control the class and I don't want to do it anymore, em, because she is nice, she is just not a good teacher (xx).

Since we were keen to explore their suggested focus, we responded by letting them continue, and this is how they built on each other's ideas:

Extract 2: More features of good teachers

S1: They [good teachers] will let you go out on the bell and you are not kept in for any reason.

S2: Good teachers, I think, are funny, or humorous because, because (xx) if they are funny, and people like them, then people respect them and then (xxx)

S1: they want to learn maybe. It is funny and friendly because people would like you because (xx)

S1: I really like it to be firm but fair (xx)

S3: Good teachers plan lesson so it covers everything (xx) and do not run over.

In addition to their opinions coming to the surface, the children also revealed that they had never been asked about their views regarding any aspect of learning at school, other than when a student came from the university to do her project on Shakespeare.

Extract 3: Teachers don't ask children

R: Does any of your teachers ever ask you (x) about what you think about the lessons?

S1: No, not really (xx) well our English teacher is doing some, emm (x)

S2: Shakespeare things

S1: Stuff em for some Masters course or something to Cambridge University or something, and for that you've got to, she gives you lots of surveys that 'what did you think of this?' and 'what did you think of that?' and what you felt..' what did you feel worked the best for you?' and probably done.. like loads of em questionnaires, 'how did you think the lesson could have been better?' and stuff... But that's just kind of just like

R for her research?

S1: em yeah, for her mark, yeah.

What is interesting here is that asking children's opinions about their experiences is not looked upon as a normal part of everyday life. Teachers dont want to know about children's views and on the one occasion when these children were asked about what they thought, their opinion was only needed to satisfy the requirements of a teacher's assignment at the university.

Understanding the data

In our work we often notice that children ask questions about aspects of the project that suddenly interest them. In the following exampleworking with Iranian children, we noticed that they were asking questions related to the technical details of handling research data such as transcribing, or using pseudonyms. Here, some children are looking at the extracts of the transcript that the researcher has prepared, and they are noticing and recogniing their own utterances. The researcher confirms that all those transcriptions are exactly what the children actually said. The children are surprised and pleased to see their own words in print.

Extract 4: Transcriptions

S1: So this is like based on something we said (xx).

R: ehm, yeah, yeah.

S1: Cause I remember saying that! (...)

R: Yes, everything ... there is based on what you said.

S2: Yeah?

R: Because that's what I learnt from you!

This type of technical knowledge building occurs spontaneously when children are genuinely interested in the process. They often notice aspects and features that seem uninteresting or just ordinary to us, adults. In the next extract, below, one of the participants is questioning the researcher why she cannot be represented in the project using her own name. The researcher is reminding Abba that she needs to use a pseudonym.

Extract 5: Understanding about research

S1: I don't (xx) hm, Abba is fine (x)

R: Pardon?

S1: Abba is fine.

R: Abba? But that is your real name. I can't put your real name.

S1: Then what?

R: Whatever that is not your name, so that I would (xx) when people read it they don't recognize you.

S1: Ok.

In our experiences, children are also very keen to help with the design of different research tools. Children's input into questionnaires, interview questions or activities makes these tools more 'authentic' in the sense that they are likely to appeal more to other children. Here, the researcher is working with a group of children who have just

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piloted an activity designed for others. They have been asked to make suggestions to improve the activity to make it more suitable and attractive to other children.

Extract 6: Piloting/improving research instruments

R: And, hm, what do you think about this one? [referring to one of the activities]

S1: It was fun, yeah, but it was like you know (xx) usually you think about differences, I never thought about the things that are similar, but, yeah, I liked it.

R: So, is it good to have it? To think about similarities as well?

S1: Yeah.

R: I was just thinking maybe friends would be good to have in pairs.

S2: Yeah, I think it would be better (xx) cause they won't mess about, that's not good for your project (laughter)

R: (laughter)

S2: Not good for anything.

The children here talk the researcher through the different parts of the activity and say which parts they like and why and they also make a good point about the need to let children who are friends work together when the activity is implemented.

Emotions

In addition to making comments and asking questions, children also often express their views and emotions spontaneously. Rather than just engage with adult-initiated ideas, they offer valuable spontaneous insights. Engagement leads to empowerment and increased levels of motivation and concentration.

Here the children express their positive emotions about the research project in general and they say they do not want it to come to an end.

Extract 7: Positive emotions (R = researcher; S = student)

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S1: You know what I do, I don't want to EVER go from this room.

S2: Yeah it is so cool.

R: Good, I am happy that you are enjoying it, and if you feel tired it is fine. You can leave now.

S: It is like you could *khali* [express] yourself!

S: Are we going to play games?

R: We are going to read everyone's answers and then we are going to talk about it, like the previous game.

S: Oh, that's fun!

Spontaneous comments like these are somehow more genuine than responses relating to direct questions such as 'Did you like this activity?'

Discussion

Our work so far has convinced us that taking a child-ed perspective in our explorations is a worthwhile approach. Working with children in this way is a commitment that is time-consuming and challenging, but overall it allows a special relationship to develop between teachers, researchers and children. In the ongoing discussions of these processes and the data within a meaningful engagement between the adult and the children, children's voices will emerge spontaneously. Their views and contributions can challenge adult views and understandings and these comments, questions and alternative ideas are important for adult researchers to notice and engage with.

Putting children in the centre of research links well with the idea of autonomy and a general need to develop strategies and 'learning to learn' in all classrooms (Little 2011). However, a 'genuine barrier to children engaging in research is their lack of research knowledge and skills' (Kellett 2010: 197). Many therefore advocate research training for children for ages 9 and above (Kellett 2010). There are training books and programmes available for interested teachers and researchers focussed on step-by-step development of research skills form setting research questions to analysing and writing up collected

data. Even though placing children in the centre of research has been shown to be working at younger ages (Clark and Moss 2005), we have not actually worked with children under the age of 9, and we suspect that because younger children tend to be less interested in reflecting on their views and opinions, the ideas and participatory activities discussed in this paper would not be directly transferable.

Additionally, for children aged 8-9 or above, however, ideas for projects in different contexts could include asking children about good teachers, attractive language learning materials or motivating activities as a way of inviting them to propose their own ideas for a relevant research focus. Currently we do not know enough about how children make sense of their language learning experiences, and what they would consider important to research. We need to put an effort into understanding children's language learning experiences, if we are serious about narrowing the gap between teachers'/researchers' and children's perspectives. As a first step, the adult can introduce the idea of classroom research and discuss with the children possible projects. Children may also be able to work together with another class and interview each other. Whatever project is decided on, and whatever he restrictions and limitations, any teacher or researcher will be able to gain new insights from the process of researching with children.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this approach of working with children as active participants and 'co-researchers' is not without challenges. Critical voices point to the fact that completely child-ed research is not realistic because of adults' ultimate control (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). It is debatable whether children can ever take full charge of any research, or whether their agency is just the product of having being socialied into adult ways of doing research. Sometimes children may resist participatory activities prepared with the best intentions or play out their agency by diverting completely from the activity planned by the adult. There are also many ethical dilemmas. How much do the children actually understand about the research and how genuine is their consent and interest? How much responsibility is fair to expect the children to take, and will the research ultimately serve their best interests?

The following table summaries some of the advice we can offer based on our experience.

Key questions for adult researchers	

What is your own perspective of children and childhood?	These personal constructions will influence your whole approach to research and the way you see children. It is an important starting point for adults to reflect on.
What is your own relationship like with the children?	It is a good idea to reduce the power imbalance between children and adults if this is possible by spending time to get to know the children and ask for their help but in some cases where this is not possible it is important to make relationships and identities explicit and spend time to negotiate and understand these.
Whose consent do you need?	Children need to understand the purpose of the project and their role in it, and they should give their own consent. It is also important to monitor during the project that they are still happy to continue. In addition to children's own consent, it is also essential to get the parents' and the teachers' consents. There are important cultural differences and interpretations when it comes to consent and these need to be carefully managed in any one project.
How will the children participate?	It is best to organie friendship groups where all participants are comfortable with one another. It is good to separate boys and girls because they have different communication styles. Letting children speak freely is the aim (even if they seemingly divert form the original point). It is important to emphasie that there are no right or wrong answers and encourage the children to build on one another's input.
Why have multiple meetings/alternative activities?	Even in shorter projects, it is a good idea to revisit previous experiences. We found it was useful to get

	back to the children we worked with and let them talk about their experiences in our participatory activities. Different projects will allow for different levels of participation but it is almost always a good idea to have a follow-up meeting or have alternative activities as part of a back-up plan.
Can children be involved in data analysis?	Some children we have worked with took a genuine interest in how research worked and asked spontaneous questions about data analysis and representation. They even volunteered ideas about what was important in their own or their friends' input.
Whose interest does your research serve?	We felt that the children in our project genuinely learnt something about themselves and the processes of research. Many of them also reported to have had a good time. What the children gain will differ from project to project but it is always important for the adults to come back to this core question.

Conclusion

What is important is that in projects where adults decide to collaborate with children in their research, there is a true desire to elicit children's views and contributions, and there is a commitment to take into account the children's own interests, their perspectives and their developing awareness about research. By involving children in research projects (even if only on a small scale at the beginning), focusing on the topics which concern them, teachers can also learn more about their learners' preferences which will help them design better, more suitable classroom activities and materials. In this way, regular lessons might become more meaningful and engaging, and this will ultimately enhance young learners' motivation and involvement in learning. Everyone will learn something new: teachers/researchers will find out about children's views and children gradually learn more and more about research. Children will have fun, and they

will feel proud of their roles and contributions.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

(R) researcher

(S1) student

(x)pause of 23 seconds

CAPITAL LETTERSemphasis

*(Italics):*explanation