Communicating With Parents Across Cultures: An Investigation of an ESL Parents' Night

YAN GUO

University of Calgary

ABSTRACT: Increasing diversity in the student population intensifies the need for establishing culturally responsive communication between teachers and parents. This study examines the communication processes between Chinese immigrant parents and Canadian English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in a Parents' Night event organized to increase understanding of the ESL program. It is based on observations of three annual Parents' Nights, interviews of ESL teachers and bilingual assistants who acted as interpreters for parents, and focus groups. Results indicate that teachers approached Parents' Night as a mass educational event, which limits the scope for Taylor's "dialogue across differences." As an educational event, Parents' Night appears to be effective in providing general information about the ESL program for new parents. But as an intercultural conflict negotiation event, Parents' Night is ineffective in satisfying experienced parents. The study illustrates how teachers' failure to understand the cultural frame of reference of the immigrant parents created more tensions (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Implications for preparing teachers to work with parents from diverse cultures are discussed.

RESUMÉ: La diversité au sein de la population estudiantine s'accroît et accentue donc le besoin d'établir une communication réceptive dans les différentes cultures et surtout entre les enseignants et les parents. Cette étude recherche les procédés de communication entre les parents immigrants chinois et les enseignants d'anglais canadien comme langue étrangère (ALE) lors de la "Nuit des parents;" événement organisé pour accroître la compréhension du programme de ALE . Cet événement est basé sur des observations recueillies, sur des entretiens de professeurs d'ALE et d'assistants bilingues qui ont joué le rôle d'interprètes auprès des parents et sur des groupes choisis, lors de trois événements "Nuits des parents." On a constaté que les professeurs ont abordé la "Nuit des parents" comme un événement éducatif de masse ce qui limite la portée pour 'le dialogue à travers les différences' de Taylor. Il apparaît qu'en tant qu'événement éducatif,

la "Nuit des parents" doit être propice à fournir des informations générales aux nouveaux parents, sur le programme de ALE. Il est à noter cependant qu'en tant qu'événement de négociation conflictuelle multiculturelle, la "Nuit des parents" n'est pas convaincante pour les parents qui ont déjà de l'expérience. L'observation montre que le manque de compréhension de la part des professeurs dans le cadre culturel référencé pour des parents immigrants, a créé des tensions supplémentaires (Scollon et Scollon, 2001). A l'heure actuelle, et afin de préparer les enseignants à travailler avec des parents de contextes culturels différents, des implications sont en cours de discussion.

Introduction

The results of the 2006 Census show that approximately 16.2% of Alberta's population was foreign-born, representing the third highest proposition after Ontario and British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2007). These figures suggest that the student population in Alberta schools is increasingly diverse. Increasing diversity in the student population intensifies the need for establishing culturally sensitive and meaningful communication between teachers and parents. However, research shows that many new teachers are not prepared to work effectively with parents from different cultural backgrounds (Alberta Beginning Teachers' Survey, 2002; Guo, 2006; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004). This study investigated the communication processes between English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and Chinese immigrant parents (chiefly from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China) through a focal communication event, ESL Parents' Night, where they discussed their views of an ESL program in particular and the education of immigrant adolescent students in general.

As reported elsewhere, there were significant discrepancies between ESL teachers' and parents' perspectives of the ESL program and education (Guo, 2007). ESL teachers believed that the ESL program helped students acquire proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and to develop appropriate attitudes such as responsibility, cooperation, and confidence, socializing into Canadian school and social cultures, and acquiring basic skills such as research, group work, and oral presentations in order to prepare them for entry into regular classrooms. By contrast, in the parents' views, the current ESL program had many problems – the lengthy time ESL students spent in the program (normally two years), the lack of exams, mixed grades, the low level of content, and the lack of grammar instruction. For example, with respect to assessment, there were no

clear exit criteria for the ESL program. The decision about a student's readiness to leave the ESL program was made by all the teachers who taught the same student, based on their classroom observations and subjective evaluations. On the other hand, parents wanted exit tests as benchmarks for their children to move out of the ESL program.

ESL Parents' Night was different from routine parent-teacher conferences at report-card time. Parents of ESL students found that the routine parent-teacher meetings were too short and did not address their concerns about the ESL program. Thus, the ESL department organized a special annual teacher-parent conference to address the concerns of ESL parents. Parents' Night was a complex event, and its first part typically began in the school auditorium, where the school principal welcomed ESL parents and students. Next, a school area superintendent outlined provincial and school district ESL policy. Then others reviewed services such as counseling and multicultural liaison. All speeches were delivered in English and were translated into both Mandarin and Cantonese by the liaison worker. In the second part of the evening, teachers, parents, and students moved to seven individual homerooms, where the ESL teacher explained to parents how the program prepared students for mainstream classes; students showed their parents portfolios of their work and presented topics regarding Canadian educational and cultural norms. An attempt by educators to inform parents about the ESL program via the Parents' Night reflected a mismatch between the cultural expectations of educators and parents.

Theoretical Framework
What underlies conflict and miscommunication between ESL parents and teachers? Two important views shed light on such conflict – intercultural communication or intercultural differences and Taylor's "dialogue across differences" (1994, 1997). I take up each one in turn.

Intercultural Communication
Intercultural miscommunication centers on differences between groups which result in different interpretations in communication. It "occurs when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently" (Lustig & Koester, 2003, p. 50). Scollon and Scollon (2001) explain that the discourses of our cultural groups "make it more difficult for us to interpret those who are members of different groups. We call

these enveloping discourses 'discourse systems'... the major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of discourse" (pp. xii-xiii). Discourse systems include the following aspects of culture: ideology, socialization, forms of discourse, and face systems.

Li (2006) provides an example of an interview study of ESL parents and teachers that discusses intercultural differences (but not communication). She explored culturally contested pedagogy by examining the views of language education (traditional, teacher-centered, code emphasis vs. progressive, student-centered, meaning emphasis) of Chinese middle-class parents and mainstream teachers in a publicly-funded elementary school in Richmond, British Colulmbia, Canada. She proposed a "pedagogy of cultural reciprocity" so that teachers and parents might work together more successfully. In a critical review, Wamba (2006), drawing on Freirian work, points out that Li's single focus on Chinese educational culture has value, but is hardly an adequate explanation of all educational disagreements between teachers and Chinese parents. Nor does it address the *educational* question: what is best for the learner? Wamba underlines the need to study actual parent-teacher interactions where teachers knowledgeable about second language and culture learning aim at reconciling differences about the education of their children.

"Dialogue Across Differences"/ Practical Reasoning
Where the intercultural approach concentrates on differences, the "dialogue across differences" view aims to overcome differences and resolve conflicts to bring two sides together. This view comes from the philosopher Charles Taylor who accepts that the modern age is plural in two respects: there is an "irreducible plurality" of values and cultures, and there is also a plurality of forms of reflection, with any form of reflection being conditioned by the author's culture and other factors. For Taylor, unlike many postmodern writers, it does not follow that one must simply accept the "irreducible plurality" (Tully, 1994, p. xiv). Taylor believes what he calls "practical reason" offers the possibility of a rational arbitration of differences between conflicting views in culture, ethics, and other areas by reasoned argument aiming at validity. Since it deals with difference and dialogue, this arbitration could be called a "dialogue across differences" (Taylor, 1994, 1997). Going beyond the aim of a more perspicacious appreciation of differences between interlocutors, the goal of practical reason is to reach agreement between disputing positions. As such, practical reason provides an alternative to

lapsing into subjectivism and relativism. Practical reason "starts from something that is common to the two (or more) positions in the dispute ... it is directed at the participants in the conversation and at the things they posit or value" (Abbey, 2000, p. 166). Practical reason "strives, through the comparison, questioning and rearticulation of views, either towards some reconciliation of differences or to persuading the interlocutors that they should come to agree that one position is better" (p. 166).

Informed by intercultural communication and dialogue across differences, this study investigated the communication processes between ESL teachers and parents through ESL Parents' Night. Three initial research questions guided the study:

1. How do teachers involve students at Parents' Night? Why?
2. How do parents reflect on student presentations at Parents' Night? Why?
3. How do parents react to Parents' Night? Why?

Methodology

Research Site

The study was conducted at Milton Secondary School (a pseudonym) located on the west side of Vancouver, British Columbia. Milton was chosen for three reasons: diversity in student population, its ESL program, and its ESL Parents' Night. A secondary school with about 1,700 students from Grades 8 to 12, is situated in a quiet, middle-to upper-middle class neighborhood. Sixty-two percent of the students spoke a language other than English at home. The approximate number of students studying in the ESL program in the year 1997 was 200, in 1998, 160 students, and in 1999, 120 students. Many of the students were recent immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. The ESL program consisted of a number of non-credit content-based courses such as ESL science which integrated the instruction of the English language and subject matter simultaneously. The exceptions were physical education and math which were mainstream classes. The students at Milton generally stayed in the ESL program for two years. The program had organized an ESL Parents' Night for more than ten years. These nights allowed teachers to inform parents about the philosophy of the ESL program and students and to explain the differences in educational systems between Canada and their home societies.

The investigator was introduced to the teachers and parents as a researcher from a Canadian university who studied the processes of home-school communication. She played the role of participant observer (Spradley, 1980), seeking to "maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation" (p. 60). As requested by teachers', she explained Parents' Night to the parents on the phone, presented information gathered from the parents at the teachers' planning meetings, interpreted for Chinese parents at Parents' Night, and reported parents' feedback to the teachers after Parents' Night.

Participants

Nine ESL teachers and six bilingual assistants participated in the study. All of the teachers participated in the planning, delivery, and feedback sessions of the Parents' Night. They also involved their students in the entire process. The bilingual assistants were trained graduate research assistants who were also experienced ESL teachers. Before the Parents' Night, teachers sent home invitations in English to parents, explaining that the purpose of the event was to inform parents about the ESL program. The assistants followed up the invitations to parents in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English. Many Chinese parents were post-secondary educated entrepreneurs, investors, or professionals from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.[1] In the parent questionnaires, parents stated that the major reason they immigrated to Canada was for their children's education. The parents had been in Canada from a few months to four years. The bilingual assistants served as interpreters at Parents' Night.

Data Collection

Three research methods – interviews, naturalistic observations, and focus groups – were used for data collection over a three-year period. The researcher observed 12 ESL department planning meetings for Parents' Night, four for each event. At these meetings, teachers discussed their purposes and educational philosophies for Parents' Night. Three annual ESL Parents' Nights were observed. Observations focused on how teachers and students made their presentations, how parents asked their questions, and how teachers responded. With the consent of the teachers and parents, the 12 planning meetings and three Parents' Nights were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The researcher interviewed six bilingual assistants individually. Each interview lasted for 30 to 50 minutes. Before Parents' Night, bilingual assistants telephoned 257 parents/guardians to explain the purpose of the event in Mandarin or Cantonese. On referral from the assistants, the researcher made a further 105 follow-up calls with parents/guardians to clarify the nature of parents' concerns. While there were a number of concerns from the parents, perhaps the major concern was with the length of time that students stayed in the ESL program. After Parents' Night, the assistants also talked to the parents informally to get their feedback on the event, particularly about their reactions to teachers' and students' presentations and whether their concerns were addressed. Parents' feedback was recorded in bilingual assistants' and the researcher's field notes. The parents did not provide consent for formal face-to-face interviews, but allowed the bilingual assistants and the researcher to take notes during telephone conversations. The bilingual assistants listened to and recorded parents' questions and comments. The interviews with the assistants focused on parents' interpretations of the ESL program, parents' major concerns, and their strategies for working on these concerns.

After Parents' Night, the researcher also interviewed nine ESL teachers individually. Each interviews lasted from 30 to 80 minutes. Three teachers were interviewed twice because of their active involvement in Parents' Night. These interviews allowed teachers to reflect on their experience with the event and to articulate their beliefs about ESL education.

A focus group with eight ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants was also conducted after individual interviews were completed. The summary of the interviews was duly reported and the group also reviewed data about the parents' feedback conveyed by six bilingual assistants. The focus group generated more information about teachers' and parents' perspectives of ESL learning and parents' concerns, valuable data used for purposes of triangulation. A total of 35 tapes, each 60 minutes in length, held the discourse data collected over a period of three years.

Data Analysis

The process of qualitative data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic, as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). Data analysis in this study was ongoing throughout the data collection period.

The ongoing analysis helped to identify emerging themes. The inductive analysis strategy was applied to the interview data in order to understand how participants approached Parents' Night. Observation data of the teachers' planning meetings were also analyzed inductively to identify teachers' goals for Parents' Night. This was accomplished by searching for patterns that emerged from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). More systematic analysis was conducted after the data collection was completed and the interviews were transcribed.

Findings and Discussion

Three major themes emerged through analysis of the transcripts: a) teachers' purposes for Parents' Night, b) parents' reflection on the student oral presentations, and c) differences between new and experienced parents in their reactions to Parents' Night. The following section summarizes the themes and provides excerpts from the data.

Teachers' Purposes for Parents' Night

Teachers identified three goals for Parents' Night at their third planning meeting – to inform parents and students about the ESL program and the Canadian education system; to demonstrate student strengths in reading, writing, listening, and speaking through presentations/activity; and to improve communication between ESL students and parents.

With respect to the first goal, teachers believed that the purpose of Parents' Night was to introduce the parents to the teaching philosophy of the ESL program. Such purpose was illustrated in the following teacher interview excerpts:

> I see that [Parents' Night] as just providing general information about the ESL program for parents.

> Really this [Parents' Night] is a kind of education for the parents and students.

> Our students are primarily Chinese from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the predominant mode of instruction is rote learning. Students are motivated by demanding and strict teachers who give tests regularly and expect students to memorize what is said in the classroom. Our more lenient approach, based on developing thinking skills and creativity is already a huge shift for parents to grasp. ... As professional educators, teachers

in the ESL department recognize the need to educate our parents,
as well as our students, to the goals and philosophy behind our
system. ... As they [parents] continually push their children to
work hard and get out of ESL, we feel it essential to organize a
Parents Night every year to introduce our parents to these new
ideas.

As the first and second excerpts show, in the teachers' eyes, the purpose of Parents' Night is to provide "general information about the ESL program for parents." In the last excerpt, the teacher compares educational approaches used in Hong Kong and Taiwan to those used in Canada, reflecting on the contrast between views and values of ESL parents and of teachers (e.g., rote learning vs. thinking skills) and a sense of parents' concerns about leniency and multi-level classes. The teacher provides an explanation of the Canadian system in an effort to help Chinese parents accept it. In other words, the teacher sets up a stage to provide a lecture on irreducible differences to which the newcomers must adapt, not a reconciliation of two systems proposed by Taylor (1994, 1997). Seeing an urgent professional responsibility to inform parents about how Canadian programs are different, the teacher describes Parents' Night mainly as a mass educational information event, which limits the scope for Taylor's "dialogue across differences."

With respect to goals two and three, teachers believed it important for students to participate in Parents' Night. In addition to demonstrating students' presentation skills, teachers also aimed to improve communication between ESL students and their parents. One teacher explained the rationale for such purpose:

We had another interesting area, that is, the development of
adolescent teenagers in a Canadian school. When immigrants
come, how will that development process be different? We are
presuming there may be some challenges between parents and
their children during this age, may be more than others. We are
also presuming that there will be even more challenges because
the experiences teenagers have in the school and in the culture
may be different from their home cultures. This will give rise to
some attitudinal and perceptual differences between parents and
their children.

The teacher realizes there are tensions in communication between immigrant teenagers and parents due to cultural and intergenerational differences. For instance, the teacher noted in the interview that "*the Asian students we have are not encouraged by their home cultures to*

voice their opinions or share their feelings." The teachers wanted to provide the message that it is a normal process for teenagers to communicate with parents. One teacher explained:

> *What we wanted to do is to set the stage to give the message that this is a normal process of communicating teenagers with parents, and that our culture encourages it. So, we're getting at not only teachers communicating with parents but having students themselves communicate with their parents and other peers' parents.*

The teachers realized these goals during the event by using students' presentations. As noted earlier, the experiences that ESL students have in the school might be different from that in their home cultures. For example, a group of ESL students presented the following message to their parents at Parents' Night:

> *Privacy:*   *We want to have our own privacy.*
> *(Please don't come into my room without telling me or knocking!)*
>
> *Freedom:*   *We want the freedom to manage our time.*
> *We want the freedom to talk to our friends.*
> *We want the freedom to choose our tutors.*
> *(Please don't nag me. I want to be responsible.)*

The ESL students presented their newly learned concepts of privacy and freedom, highlighting the cultural differences between Canada and Taiwan. This excerpt shows that when Chinese immigrant students are learning English, they are also socializing into the value systems and behaviour patterns of the Canadian culture (Ochs, 1988).

For teachers, it is important for students to participate at Parents' Night for the following stated reasons. The teachers' emphasis on student involvement in Parents' Night reflects their strong belief about a "student-centred" educational philosophy. They also hope that parents might feel proud of their children's achievement, demonstrated through the oral presentations, although it may be difficult for some parents to make that judgement. Moreover, they attempt to "ease the intergenerational tensions between immigrant parents and their children" (teacher interview). They intend to establish a way for immigrant students to inform their parents about their cultural learning process in order to build understanding between students and parents.

Parents' Reflection on the Student Oral Presentation

The teachers' rationales for involving students in the process of Parents' Night were well justified. However, parents reacted to student involvement differently. Some parents complained:

- *I don't want to drive all the way here to listen to my kids. I can ask them at home. I want to hear what teachers have to say.*
- *We don't need those students to talk in the evening. I understand that they are working hard and we should not push them, but the time is too short, so we can cut students' talk because we don't have time to ask questions.*

The above comments suggest that some parents are not happy with student presentations. Chinese parents are usually strict with their children and often give them independence at a much older age than children in the West (Ho, 1996).

Parents appeared to express four points of dissatisfaction with student presentations. First, parents may not like the message in the students' presentation. They may not approve of the concepts of privacy and freedom embodied in "*please don't come into my room without telling or knocking,*" or "*we want the freedom to talk to our friends.*" Traditionally Chinese parents do not need to knock at their children's doors if they want to talk to them. In a Chinese home the house is collectively owned by all the members of the family. The degree of individual privacy is not as strong as that in the western culture. Also, the parents may have checked on the backgrounds of their children's friends in order to protect them, particularly in an unfamiliar environment. Parents felt their children stayed in ESL "too long," and they began to hang around with bad kids and skip school since they feel ESL is not challenging. They were worried about their children's academic achievement and socialization. As a result they may wish to assert their parental control over their children's choice of friends.

Second, the way students were talking to their Chinese parents is culturally inappropriate. In the Chinese culture, children are expected to show their filial piety (*xiao*) and obedience to parents and elders (Ho, 1996). Chinese children must address elders properly, not in the manner these students talked to their parents at Parents' Night. The students used "*we want...we want...we want...we want*" in their speeches. The repetition of *want* is likely to be interpreted by Chinese parents as a series of demands, not simply a report on feelings. Telling parents what to do can be seen as inappropriate in many cultures. Such behaviour can

be problematic because, in the Chinese culture, as in other cultures, it can be seen as a lack of respect for parents. It may also cause more tensions between Chinese parents and their children. Tung (2000) reminds us that it would be "a mistake for the children to confront the [Chinese] parents, to put them on the spot. Confrontation requires stark individuality. To maintain their dignity or to save face, the parents would then have to stand their ground" (p. 16). Smith (1991), in his study of the pattern of communication between parents and children in Taiwan, also concludes that a child's verbal challenge to a parent was considered to be disobedient behaviour and a disruption to the family harmony.

Third, in students' presentations, students mainly demonstrated their oral English skills. However, some parents wanted to see the evidence of their children's written English ability, shown in students portfolios. Students' oral presentations may not appeal to Chinese parents because Chinese people usually do not value verbal communication (Tung, 2000). Their children have to prepare for the "Test of English as a Foreign Language" and the "Language Proficiency Index" (a test for written English) required for admission to university and other post-secondary institutions in the province. These examinations require excellent written skills. Parents may view the ESL program, with an emphasis on oral over written skills, as not adequately preparing their children for admission to university.

Fourth, as we have seen above, one parent said "*I don't want to drive all the way here to listen to my kids. I can ask them at home. I want to hear what teachers have to say.*" When parents make comments like this, they indicate that they wanted to hear about the program from the teachers, not from students. This may be true for parents in other cultures. However, in the Chinese culture, teachers are seen as experts of knowledge, and students as consumers of knowledge. Chinese parents may have felt that students did not have the right to explain the ESL program to them. Instead they may have wanted to hear about the program from teachers who are more knowledgeable and accountable. It seems that cultural differences between home and host countries result in different appropriate forms of presentation. In sum, when students make presentations in public challenging their parents' views, this may be problematic in terms of both the content of the message and the format. Unfortunately, the failure of the teachers' to understand the cultural frame of reference of immigrant parents created more tensions (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Differences Between New and Experienced Parents in their
Reactions to Parents' Night

The parents showed a range of reactions to Parents' Night.

New Parents. The most positive reactions were from the parents new to Canada. Their children were relatively new to the ESL program. The parents usually did not know much about the Canadian educational system and were anxious about their children's progress in school. This group of parents seemed to be happy with the general information about school policies and the ESL program provided at Parents' Night. This was evident from the fact that many of them expressed appreciation. For example, parents commented:

- *The Parents' Night was very helpful to me because I learned so much about the ESL program.*
- *Now I know how many courses that my son takes in the ESL program.*

It appeared that these parents accepted teachers' goals for Parent's Night as an educational event. New parents were a difficult group for teachers to communicate with as they were not familiar with the Canadian education system. Parents' Night was successful for them, and this success underlines the importance of making parents aware of the underlying assumptions of the ESL program, teaching the English language and Canadian culture simultaneously.

Even so, there were some communication difficulties that appeared to be due to intercultural mismatches. For example, new parents were unfamiliar with Parents' Night as a school event. As one of the parents stated:

> *In Taiwan we were used to learning about our own children by*
> *means of marks on report cards. When we were invited to go to*
> *the Parents' Night we did not know why we need to go.*

When invited, many parents were initially unwilling to come to Parents' Night. Chan (1976) explains that in Hong Kong, Chinese parents seldom attend school functions – often, if the school asks to see parents, it means their children have are in trouble. There is a negative association with the parents' presence in the school. Moreover, since parents knew little about the ESL program, it was difficult for them to recognize that the educational assumptions of the ESL program were different from those in Taiwan. Hence it was difficult for them to recognize the need to understand these differences. Parents' Night seemed to be a new concept for them. They came to Parents' Night to learn about their own children,

not to learn general information about the program. Simply put, their initial question was "*can you give me information about my child?*"

Experienced Parents. The experienced parents were people whose children had typically been in the program for at least one year or more, and were familiar with the ESL program, with Parents' Night as a school event, and more aware of teachers' purposes. They knew more about the Canadian educational system and had a high level of anxiety about their children's progress in school. Parents were concerned that ESL classes took time away from mainstream classes, and viewed two years in the ESL program as too long for their children. Some considered the ESL program as useless because ESL programming is designated as non-credit. This seriously hampers ESL students' possibility of high school graduation before reaching the age limit of 19. Consequently, a main question was: "*when will my child exit the ESL program?*"

Many of the experienced parents were therefore strongly dissatisfied with the topics covered at Parents' Night. Some said that Parents' Night was "*a waste of time,*" and they would not come again. For example:

- *I would not come to Parents' Night because I have been to Parents' Night before, but my concerns were not addressed. It was useless to come because what I really wanted from teachers was to ask them to give ESL students an exit test so that I would know when my children were ready to move to mainstream classes.*
- *I would like to meet the teacher individually to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. I don't feel I should go to Parents' Night unless I can talk to the teacher. It means that their children are in trouble.*

Many experienced parents, familiar with Parents' Night as a school event, rejected its topics, wanting discussion of different topics ("*my concerns,*" "*how well my child is doing*"). Many wanted their children to go to university but considered that they would not graduate at the correct age if the ESL program slowed down their progress. Consequently they wanted their children to exit the program quickly for the mainstream.

Conclusion and Implications

The study suggests that as an *educational event,* Parents' Night appears to be relatively effective in providing general information about the ESL program for new parents. But as an *intercultural conflict negotiation event,* Parents' Night is ineffective in satisfying experienced parents. It appears that Parents' Night was appropriate for the newly arrived

immigrant parents as an educational event, but it operated under difficulties, because they had different expectations. It seemed the experienced parents saw a need for Parents' Night to be an event of intercultural conflict negotiation. They expressed mounting dissatisfaction saying that their concerns were not addressed and they were unable to articulate or negotiate their concerns. Teachers were responsible for presentation of information, but opportunities for parents to interact at Parents' Night were limited. Without participation by parents, it is difficult to see how the "dialogue across differences" that Taylor recommends might be possible (1994, 1997). It is evident that the way Parents' Night was constructed as an educational event makes it difficult to provide for intercultural conflict negotiation and resolve the deep differences between teachers and parents.

What are some of the implications of this study for theory and research? The intercultural model was very helpful in identifying cultural differences which were sources of misunderstanding. There were a number of cultural mismatches between teachers and parents, such as views about student presentations. However, not all conflict can be attributed to cultural differences. The concerns of the experienced parents with the ESL program cannot be adequately explained as a matter of cultural mismatch. The more urgent concern of the experienced parents was the length of time their children stayed in the ESL program, affecting their high school completion. Taylor's dialogue/practical reasoning model is therefore an essential addition to any study of intercultural groups which is interested in studying the possibilities of consensus across differences. It was helpful in recognizing teacher strategies at Parents' Night which were aimed towards consensus with parents, while noting that the conditions for full dialogue were neither an aim nor were present at the mass meeting of Parents' Night.

What are some of the practical implications? What can be done to mitigate the conflict between teachers and experienced parents? Parents' Night is a highly appropriate forum to discuss the aims of an ESL program with new parents but not to negotiate conflict with experienced parents who want their child to exit the program. In their case Parents' Night as an ESL parent-teacher communication process was problematic and was not able to resolve their differences, placing the resolution of this conflict in doubt. Some experienced parents said that they wanted an individual parent-teacher conference about their child's progress. These were regularly available at the school during the

school year which can be used a site of negotiation. If the parent was not satisfied with the result of these, the parent could appeal to the school administration to exit their child. The school created a school-level ESL parent committee. This committee was lobbying the school to provide clear exit criteria for the ESL program and was lobbying the school board for credit for ESL programs. This can play a role in mediating between parents and ESL teachers, communicating information, examining conflicts, developing ways that parents and teachers can cooperate more, and exploring possible educationally responsible changes in the ESL program that are within the ESL teachers' control. Finally, the committee can open a dialogue about progress in the mainstream. In the relatively affluent school in this study, ESL students often had a large number of private tutors, who tutored them for several mainstream courses, and the ESL teachers at the school had held meetings with groups of private tutors to seek ways of coordinating their joint efforts. Where circumstances permit, then, this committee can also form a link between parents, teachers, and private tutors to support students' progress in the mainstream towards graduation.

Teacher education programs should increase their efforts to prepare teachers to communicate with ESL parents, for in Alberta schools, there are a large number of immigrant children. One of the most important factors that contribute to student success is the school's ability to bridge the gap(s) between the school and its various communities with effective partnerships in student learning (Hébert, Guo, & Pellerin, 2008). Currently, immigrant parent involvement goes unrecognized, possibly unwanted because it does not correspond to the norm of white, middle-class parents (Guo, 2006; Lareau, 2003). Immigrant parents often feel excluded from decision making that could improve their children's learning (Bernhard, Freire, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Villanueva, 1998). Many teachers have little idea how to work with parents from different cultural backgrounds; the need to upgrade teacher preparation is a must and it is urgent. Faltis (2006) recommends a four-level approach to building bridges between multicultural communities and schools – teacher-parent contact, sharing information in the home about schooling, participation at home and school, and parental empowerment in curricular decisions.

Sleeter (2001) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) detail a teacher education model which could not only program efforts to recruit teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, but also better train teachers to work with a diverse student population. Information about the important role of the home in ESL students' academic success

should also be included in these recommendations. Pre-service teachers should learn about the needs of ESL parents and become aware of their cultural assumptions about education (Hébert, Guo, & Pellerin, 2008). Pre-service teachers also need to learn how to provide culturally responsive communication by respecting ESL parents' home cultures and their ways of communication. Deep understanding of the parents' perspective and a trusting relationship can then lead to dialogue between educators and parents. For example, Constantino (1994) reports that one ESL secondary teacher adopted several approaches to increase parental involvement. For instance, the teacher used an ESL PTA in which the parents chose topics for discussion ranging from preventing children from joining gangs to what the students need to study every night. She also sent home a monthly newsletter and calendar to inform her parents of the students' school activities.

Monolingual teachers also need to be challenged to understand what it feels like to be an ESL student (Guo, 2006). Recently I used a language shock activity to introduce total physical response, one ESL method, in a teacher education program. The students were asked to follow my directions in Chinese. They were also asked to observe their classmates' physical reactions and share their emotional responses at the end of the activity. Some of them became frustrated and asked me if I could speak English. This role play provided an opportunity for the students to experience first-hand what it was like to be in a culture shock. We also hope that they will become more sensitive when they address the affective needs of their ESL students. Furthermore, teachers also need to develop an intercultural ability; that is, moving "across cultures in a way that is tolerant of conflicting perspectives and deeply respectful of people's lived differences" (MacPherson et al., 2004, p. 5). This intercultural ability requires that teachers move beyond learning about "other groups" to examine the cultural contexts that have influenced their own behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004).

NOTES

1. This is not to say that the Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group. In fact, there are significant differences in the political, economic, social, and educational systems between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, thus caution in generalizations about Chinese parents is needed.

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Yan Guo is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Teacher Preparation and the Graduate Division of Educational Research, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary. Her teaching and research interests include teaching English as a Second Language, intercultural communication between teachers and immigrant parents, content-based instruction, language and identity, and language policy. She has taught courses in second-language learning, second-language reading and writing, and introduction to teaching ESL in the graduate and teacher education programmes. She has published numerous journal articles and several book chapters.

Author's Address:
Faculty of Education
University of Calgary
2500 University Drive N.W.
Calgary, Alberta
CANADA T2N 1N4
EMAIL: yanguo@ucalgary.ca