Researching the attitudes and perceived experiences of kindergarten learners of English and their parents in China

Lixian Jin, Jing Zhou, Xiaoyan Hu, Xiaolan Yang, Ke Sun, Mengdi Zhao and Fan Yang

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

China has the world's largest group of young learners of English as a second or foreign language (Pan, 2015). With three decades of the single child policy (1979–2014), parents and grandparents put all their hopes and resources on the single child of each family. English language learning (ELL) has become a recognised ability and skill capacity to help ensure a child's future; hence some kindergartens offer English classes as an attractive option for parents. Bilingual kindergartens have been established in big cities, and there are many private after-kindergarten English classes in cities and towns. Zhou et al. (2014) found, in their bilingual learning project in Shanghai, that 28 per cent of children started to learn English in kindergarten, 31 per cent in after-kindergarten classes and over 65 per cent of children believed that English and Chinese are equally important in their kindergarten learning.

However, English is in fact not a kindergarten curriculum subject. Without government educational evaluation and monitoring, it is unknown how ELL actually operates for these young learners and what the learners' experiences are. In recent years, in order to reduce the 'study pressure' on children, Chinese educational authorities have advised kindergartens not to run English and other extra-curricular activities. Still, given the huge continuing parental demand, private English classes/schools for evenings and weekends continue to expand. Parents may enrol children in these classes under the perceived peer pressure that their own child cannot be 'left behind at the start of the educational race', or they may wish to realise a vision to cultivate an 'ideal self' for their child through ELL (Gao, 2013). In this context of high demand with conflicting ideas, there is still a lack of research on young learners' ELL experiences in China and, especially, on parents' views on their child's ELL. It is therefore crucial to understand the expectations and roles of learners and parents (Rubie-Davies, 2010) and to consider how to enhance ELL for early years education.

This project, sponsored by the British Council English Language Research Teaching Partnership Award, has enabled the joint research team to explore the little-known area of ELL attitudes and the experiences of Chinese kindergarten children and of their parents, as major stakeholders of English for young learners (Djigunović and Lopriore, 2011; Muñoz and Lindgren, 2011). We have chosen three locations in China for our data collection: Shanghai, Changzhou and Mudanjiang. Shanghai is a metropolitan city, Changzhou is a relatively small inland city and Mudanjiang is a border city near Russia. Both urban and rural kindergartens in each location were approached for our data collection. The research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, particularly employing metaphor and narrative analyses, to analyse participants' views and experiences at a deeper level. These methods are especially developed and proven to be effective for engaging young participants (Jin et al., 2011, 2014). It is hoped that the findings provide evidence for language policymakers to (re)consider how China should develop policy and regulations in order to meet the needs of communities and to develop foundations for internationalised educational provision. More specifically, teachers of English and parents may gain some insights from the viewpoints of these young learners, which may help ascertain how their learning experiences can be improved further.

This paper starts with an overview of Chinese preschool education practices and the theories underpinning this research. There then follows a more detailed presentation of the research methods used for this project. The key findings of the data analysis are discussed, before the conclusion.

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The context of Chinese preschool education and the teaching and learning of English

The curriculum and development guidance booklet for children aged three to six issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2012) has specified and elaborated five areas for child development through to kindergarten education. They are: health, language, socialisation, science and art. The goals and standards set up for each area and at different age groups for teaching and learning are intended to be followed nationally, irrespective of the status or type of state kindergarten they belong to. There are three 'status types' of state kindergartens: model kindergartens, those in the first rank and others in the second rank. The status types of state kindergartens are audited and assessed by the educational authority, which decides what status a state kindergarten will be given. It is expected that each city or area will have all three types of kindergarten. Model kindergartens will set good examples in all five curriculum areas to lead practices in other kindergartens and each kindergarten may also have its speciality (e.g. arts or sports) to highlight their strengths.

The language development area is focused on the skills of oral expression, and interaction with peers and adults, as well as pictorial reading and storytelling. There is no requirement to learn any foreign languages, but the emphasis is on the learning and use of the local dialect, including local ethnic minority languages and Putonghua (the standard Chinese language, also known as Mandarin).

However, on the understanding that the learning of a foreign language has been emphasised by UNESCO as a part of the skills required for the 21st century (Yang, 2008), Chinese parents have been increasingly keen to send their child to learn a foreign language as early as possible. With the influence of globalisation in China, in 2001 some metropolitan cities started the introduction of bilingual education in schools and kindergartens, although only first rank kindergartens were encouraged to teach English as a part of the curriculum. These were much better equipped kindergartens with qualified teachers and staff.

Regarding the three locations in this study, first in Shanghai between 2001 and 2010, it was expected that 100 bilingual schools would be set up. The learning of English in all schools would start from year one in primary school (Xie, 2005). This has accelerated the demand for learning of English in kindergartens, since parents would like their child to start learning English before they go to primary school, because they do not want their child to be 'behind others' at the starting point of their 'life race'. Problems have emerged with the lack of appropriate English teaching materials and trained teachers, or very young learners being overburdened (e.g. Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Chen, 2005; Li, 2007). These children might be in danger of losing their interest in English due to the emphasis on reciting the alphabet and memorising English vocabulary; the lack of teacher training might lead to teachers misusing such class activities, as the teachers' performance of singing English songs and children's lively participation may be without understanding if teachers do not study the actual effect on children's learning *(ibid.)*.

A similar trend appeared in Changzhou where parents were eager to send their young children to study English, since Changzhou is close to and influenced by Shanghai. However, some researchers (e.g. Zhang, 2012, 2013) have identified similar problems in small cities such as Changzhou to those that occur in big cities such as Shanghai, regarding the lack of appropriate English teaching materials, the unqualified teaching staff and unregulated after-school English classes.

The third location, Mudanjiang, is a border city far in the northeast of China, close to Russia. Traditionally, learning Russian was a school curriculum subject. Unlike some other faraway cities, this tradition may have encouraged local people to learn a foreign language, but so far no published research papers have been found on preschool English education in Mudanjiang. The following information is based on our observations during research visits. Since 1981 English has become the required foreign language in the school curriculum. There is the same influence of parental perception and motivation in that it gives children an advantage if children start learning English before they enter primary education, where it has been required on the curriculum since 2003. So parents in the city started sending their children to learn English either outside the kindergarten and/or to the kindergarten where English was taught.

However, there was no English teaching in suburban kindergartens. This uneven situation continued until 2013 when the local provincial educational authority stopped the local kindergartens offering English teaching. Nevertheless, this limitation does not stop parents sending their children to local private after-class schools. Similar problems to those noted above also occur in Mudanjiang for young English learners: the shortage of qualified teachers, parental confusion about choosing their child's school, the restricted choice among relatively scarce available materials, and parental questions about the contents and methods concerning learning English.

Concerning comparisons between rural and urban areas, there are a few publications (e.g. Hannum, 1999; Zhu and Zhang, 2008) that examine Chinese urban and rural education in general, but there is a dearth of published research on kindergarten English learning. In the case of Mudanjiang, a rural area, there was no suburban kindergarten which ran English classes. Thus there is already some disparity of provision. It is observable that there are gaps between educational quality and outcomes between urban and rural kindergarten English classes. This is due to similar reasons as in the Mudanjiang case, such as the shortfall in the provision of English materials, the absence of contact with native English speakers, income constraints, and the training, quality and English proficiency levels of teachers. As might be expected, these issues are exacerbated by wider rural issues related to income constraints on families, parents' educational levels and their relative lack of English competence, and also perhaps different priorities for children's futures or the career goals envisaged for children, among other factors. Additionally, certainly in urban areas, the private English teaching sectors have developed rapidly to include international English teaching and training companies that have entered the Chinese kindergarten English teaching market (e.g. Disney English has opened up a number of teaching centres to young children in major cities and coastal cities in China since 2008). Market demand has driven many private Chinese and Western educational companies to invest in the teaching of English to Chinese kindergarten-age learners as a business. Currently it seems that the Chinese educational authorities have few monitoring mechanisms and little control of the quality and effectiveness of the learning of English by kindergarten children. All these factors highlight the need to ascertain in more detail the motivation of Chinese parents who send their children to learn English and the experiences these children have in their learning of English.

3

Studies on young English learners' attitudes and experiences

Studying learners' attitudes, expectations, experiences and motivations in language learning is long established in Western education and research. The main directions of this aspect of language research include social, educational and psychological perspectives developed, for instance, by Gardner (1988), Masgoret and Gardner (2003), and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009). Although such work rarely considers kindergarten learners of English, it will nevertheless guide the project framework to examine the educational, social and psychological aspects identified and relate them to young learners. In addition, cultural aspects of language learning will be examined, since cultural factors are known to influence Chinese learners' attitudes and their learning expectations (Jin and Cortazzi, 2011), while Chinese parents' views on learning and their educational backgrounds have also been shown to have an impact on the achievement of their children (Zhou and Jin, 2012).

There have been limited research publications on the attitudes and motivations of young English learners: the study of the youngest age group of learners tends to focus on primary school children (e.g. Enever, 2011; Heinzmann, 2013; Jin et al., 2014a). Several reasons may explain this lack of research and publications. Children in many countries start to learn a second or foreign language in primary school and it is relatively easier and more plausible to investigate their learning of English as a foreign or second language when they already have some learning experience and when they are more advanced cognitively and able to offer answers to researchers. Even comparing seven and nine year old children, those aged nine are able to give more complex answers than seven years olds about their attitudes to and experience of the learning of English, even when the two groups started their English learning at the same time (Jin et al., 2014b). The younger age group understandably appears to be less independent in thinking about their reasons or motivations for learning English, apart from complying with school requirements or parental desires for children to pass exams, while nine year old learners could offer more dynamic and

independent thinking on their motivations for learning English (Jin et al., *ibid.*). The research team believed that younger learners may need further experience and time, with greater cognitive maturity, to express their own motivations. There is a need to develop different and age-appropriate research methods in order to elicit data from even younger learners, as in this project (children below seven years old), since they have already started learning English by then. Arguably, it is essential to know what these younger learners think about ELL and how they experience their learning, not least because their later motivation could be affected by their early experience and interests in ELL, and early-established attitudes may lead to their future orientation and success or failure in learning English (Williams et al., 2004).

Naturally, the study of attitudes and motivations are often closely related. At kindergarten stages of learning experiences, it is believed that capturing children's interest and developing good learning attitudes through positive experiences may yield more theoretical and practical benefits. The role of parents (Williams, 1994) may have more salient influence for the learning of this age group of children; in a Chinese context this is particularly significant as the influence of parents is a deciding force since children have been educated to listen to, obey and meet the expectations of parents, and to follow teachers' instructions (Phillipson and Phillipson, 2007). Therefore, the research team here has posed questions related to the motivations and reasons why parents send their children to study English and analysed data to examine the attitudes to ELL of both parents and their children. Another area, as argued in Dörnyei's theory of motivation (e.g. Döynyei, 2005; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009), is that the idea of self-identity may be closely related to second language learning. If learners are keen to be successful in second language learning, they may build up this ideal self for – and through – learning this language. This belief from both parents and children may motivate children to establish this ideal self and encourage them further to learn English.

In China, publications regarding the ELL of kindergarten children have mainly focused on teachers and teaching methods of early years learners (e.g. Yang, 2003) or on teaching quality (e.g. Ma, 2011). However, these papers are not research-based, but based on writers' personal observations or teaching experiences. There are also some online materials disseminated by private teaching organisations apparently designed to educate parents about their child's ELL, yet it remains unclear how far these are more for promoting the organisation's ELL programmes for commercial reasons. There have been some unpublished MA dissertations (e.g. Li, 2005; Li, 2007; Li, 2011; Tang, 2008) on the theme of preschool English learners, and these contain some research data. However, the main research method was questionnaires, designed by students themselves in the absence of published precedents. Overall, there is a professional concern about the lack of research into preschool learners of English in China, with even fewer studies concerning their parents, yet it is the parents whose desires apparently largely drive expansion of ELL for children.

The key research questions of this project therefore include:

1. What are Chinese kindergarten learners' attitudes and those of their parents towards the learning of English?

2. How do children perceive their experiences of learning English?

3. What do parental attitudes contribute to their children's learning of English?

4. What are the similarities and differences of ELL by kindergarten children in China between urban and rural/suburban areas and between inland areas and peripheral areas?

4

Research data collection and analysis methods in this study

4.1 Research methods employed in ELL for young learners

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been employed to investigate the attitudes and experiences of young English learners. Recently employed examples of research methods include observation to record classroom activities and interaction (e.g. Mourão, 2014); questionnaires to head teachers, teachers, parents and learners; interviews; language tasks (e.g. Enever, 2011); and metaphor elicitation and analysis (e.g. Jin et al., 2014b). In China, there are more numerous studies related to learning English at primary and kindergarten schools; however, many are commentaries on the situation, resources and conditions rather than evidence-based studies using empirical data. A few publications show that questionnaires and interviews were used to investigate the topic of young English learners in China, but that the participants were the teachers or parents of these children rather than children themselves (e.g. Li and Yang, 2012).

4.2. Principles of research methods employed in this study

This study has used both conventional and more innovative research methods to investigate the attitudes and experiences of kindergarten English learners and their parents in China. We maintain the use of conventional methods because they have proven successful in many projects. However, we have created more innovative research methods (i.e. elicited metaphor analysis and narrative analysis for this study) because we recognise that new data elicitation methods need to be employed in order to get more reliable information from young learners, and new methods should take into consideration their cognitive and educational development stages. The conventional methods are questionnaires and interviews with both children and their parents. However, our design principle is to produce activities which fit with children's knowledge and their learning environment. The data collection tools developed and produced are presented in the following sections.

Most of the questionnaire items are based on those with a high coefficient for reliability used in a previous ELTRP project (Jin et al., 2014b) to investigate expectations of Chinese primary school learners of English, which consulted established work by other researchers (e.g. Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; Ushioda, 2013). However, some items have been modified according to the children's learning experience and the research questions in focus for this study.

An elicited metaphor analysis (EMA) method incorporated in children's interviews has been established by the principal researcher and her colleagues over 15 years through international investigations into students' and teachers' perceptions of learning (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999, 2007, 2012; Jin and Cortazzi, 2008, 2009) and has been used with young learners of ELL including dyslexic primary bilingual learners in Singapore (Jin et al., 2011) and primary school learners in China (Jin et al., 2014a, 2014b). This qualitative method is effective for ascertaining participants' inner thoughts, feelings and views on the targeted concepts and concerns; these studies have successfully yielded findings that conventional methods might not reveal. Other researchers using EMA in educational contexts (Wan and Low, 2015) stress how this method, like any research method, is not unproblematic and they nearly always work with pre-service or experienced teachers or sometimes with secondary school students, but apparently not with young learners. This early learners project has developed this method further to explore metaphor data elicitation in addition to using storybooks, coloured cards, games, drawings, etc., since this group of participants is the youngest with which researchers have used this method.

The narrative analysis (NA), largely based on Labov's socio-linguistic model (1982) aims to extract children's perceptions, attitudes and/or experiences of learning English, in addition to a conventional use of attitude questionnaires. Labov's model (*ibid.*) provides a narrative framework with six narrative elements, namely: abstract (an overview of a story), orientation (context and people in the story), complication (something has changed or happened),

resolution/result (solution of a complication), evaluation (revealing feelings, attitudes or thoughts of the teller) and coda (indication of an end of the story). These elements may appear repeatedly in one narrative (e.g. it may include several complications), while some elements may not appear in a narrative (e.g. abstract or coda). In NA, the analysis of personally experienced learning through stories shared in interviews highlights learners' attitudes and perceptions based on these experiences (Jin et al., 2005; Cortazzi and Jin, 2006, 2007, 2012). However, since so far there are limited publications to show how this structural narrative analysis can be used successfully for this age group of participants, this study is a first attempt by the researchers of this project to explore the possibilities and effectiveness of this method as an aid to complement the established methods discussed above in a multi-method approach.

4.3. Data collection instruments and procedures

All the data collection instruments have been designed following discussion among the team members who are experienced kindergarten teacher trainers, teachers and postgraduate research students specialising in preschool education. Earlier versions of the instruments have been piloted with the same age group of children and parents to see if they are suitable and clear to participants. All of the questionnaires and interview questions are in Chinese. Ethical application for the study has been approved by both De Montfort University Ethical Committee and local kindergartens. All participants involved have been given the written project information sheet and they participated with a consent letter understood and signed by the adults for their child.

The instructions and interview questions appear formal in the written form. However, in real contexts researchers have been trained to use a spoken language style that fits with the normal environment of the participating children. The conversation tended to be chatty, informal and colloquial with a caring tone and laughter between researchers and the child.

4.3.1. Questionnaires for children and parents

Both questionnaires contain two main parts: the basic demographic information including age range, gender, status types of kindergartens, parents' educational levels, job types, income levels, expenditure range for their child learning English and the like. Secondly, questions with a three- or five-point Likert scale are asked on their attitudes to learning English focusing on aspects of learning support and environment, and the importance, motivation and function/purpose of learning English.

Parents/child carers receive the questionnaire when they come to pick up their child and they return the questionnaire after filling it in.

For the participating children, the researchers and their assistants use the normal kindergarten time to 'play' through the questionnaire items consistently with individual children in a quiet place (see Photo 1) with a tape-recorder and note-taking or ticking by the researchers. This gives children and researchers opportunities to ask questions for clarification or explanation. This data collection procedure is very time consuming, but it provides more accurate, reliable and consistent data.

Photo 1: Data collection with young children

4.3.2. Interviews with children and parents

Interview questions were all semi-structured in order to maintain consistency with both parents and children. The questions were designed to elicit detailed information from both parents and children regarding their attitudes towards learning English. Some questions were asked for them to compare their attitudes towards learning English, Putonghua and the local dialect. For parents, there were questions about how they helped their children to overcome any language learning difficulties. In the interview with children, questions were asked about why their parents asked them to learn English (if they

had already started) and how their parents supported their learning of English (e.g. singing English songs, reading with them, buying English books or cartoons for them, etc.).

The interview time was also used to collect narratives from both parents and children regarding any events related to learning English, with a key question: *Tell me any story or event about your experience of learning English.* Children were not forced to tell any 'stories' if they chose not to say anything.

To a child, it is believed that questionnaire and interview data collection procedures are very similar, for they would 'play' with 'teachers' in a quiet place in the kindergarten in familiar surroundings where the 'playing' approach is similar to their normal learning environment. Children appeared relaxed, happy and willing to be involved; they could ask any questions they wanted and naturally sometimes researchers needed tactfully to draw the children's attention from engagement playing with the provided toys or picture books back to the focus of the main questions. However, if they did not want to continue, they could request to stop at any time. The same message was given to parents as well.

4.3.3. Data collection methods and elicitation procedure for metaphors from children

Metaphor data collection can be a challenge for researchers. However, at the same time, the metaphors collected have been proven to be effective to find out insights from young learners (Jin et al., 2011; Jin et al., 2014a, 2014b) and they could be used to reconstruct conceptual thoughts from participants (Schmitt, 1995, 2005), especially when they find it hard to express their abstract thinking and views. In this case, the focus is on preschool children's attitudes and perceptions of learning English. The crucial part for the success of the data collection may lie in the design of data collection methods.

The team used a number of instruments for metaphor data collection: pictures of fruit, food, cars, clothes; toys of fruit, food, cars and animals; plastic or wood learning aids with different shapes and colours. Paper and coloured drawing pencils were provided so that children could draw anything to represent their metaphors (see Photos 2–4). It was believed that these were familiar things for these young children.

Photos 2–4: Examples of pictures for metaphor data collection

There are different metaphor analysis methods: some collect metaphors from naturally occurring language data (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and others collect metaphors elicited directly from participants (e.g. Wan and Low, 2015). The latter method may be an effective counter-argument against the criticism that metaphor analysis may have taken metaphors out of cultural context (e.g. Bowers, 2009).

This study has taken the elicited metaphor analysis, which has demonstrated its effectiveness in the contexts of education with young learners and learners with language disability, and been developed by the principal researcher and her colleagues. This EMA method (see, for example, Jin and Cortazzi, 2008, 2009, 2011; Jin et al., 2014a, 2014b for more details) presents three elements: *the target domain* (i.e. an abstract concept, e.g. a language, that the researchers aim to find out from the participants); *the source domain* (i.e. a metaphor based on a concrete object or image, which is used to explain the participant's thoughts by comparing the two; e.g. 'weapon' in 'a foreign language is a weapon'); and *the entailment* for giving the metaphor for the abstract concept (i.e. the reasons or thoughts that the participant indicates for the comparison between the target and source domains, e.g. 'a foreign language is a weapon because it can be used to attack others or win the learning competition'). Thus the design for eliciting the metaphor data in this study uses the form of 'Learning English is like ... because ...'

Since both questionnaire and interview data collection with children is in a form of semi-structured interview, the procedure for eliciting the metaphor data follows these steps:

1. The researcher chatted with the participating child about how he or she felt on the day, family members, if they had an English lesson and whether they liked it or not.

2. The child was shown different elicitation objects such as pictures, toys, as described above.

3. He or she was encouraged to give an unrelated metaphor and concept to demonstrate the comparison, e.g. 'What is your mother like? My mother is like a busy bee, because she is always running around for something at home'; this model example is in effect a metaphor rehearsal or training to ascertain that the child could give a metaphor later.

4. Asking the question of what learning English was like or how they felt about learning English; if they could not give an answer, then pointing them to the available pictures, toys and other instruments and asking if they are able to give an example; in effect, this encourages the child to give a metaphor.

5. After they gave a metaphor, there was a follow-up question asking them to give a reason about why they gave that metaphor; this elicits an entailment.

The following is an extract of the interview eliciting the metaphor data (T refers to the researcher and C refers to the child):

Table 1: An extract of metaphor data elicitation

	Chinese transcript	English translation	Brief comments
T:	你看, 学英语呀, 我觉得就像爬山一样, 因为我有时候会觉得爬山很累, 学英语也很累. 那你会觉得学英语像什么呢?	You see, studying English, I feel it's like climbing a mountain, because sometimes I feel tired while climbing the mountain and I feel tired to learn English. So what is it like for you to learn English?	**T** gave an example of metaphor and entailment.
C:	学英语呀, (有一点) 有一天, 我在学英语的时候, 有一天我在肚子不舒服的时候, 那时候我是在朋友吃了太多零食了, 所以呀, 我有天在幼儿园吐了, 全都吐得, 那个, 全都吐得下午的点心都是水.	Well, you talk about learning English. One day, when I was learning English, I felt uncomfortable in my stomach, because I had too many snacks in my friend's place, so I vomited in the kindergarten one day, vomited all out, including the snacks which became watery.	**C** followed the assumed thought of **T** and gave a story of a hard time in the kindergarten. But it was not a metaphor nor was the content related to the learning of English.
T:	哦, 那你学英语的时候是什么样的感觉呢?	Oh. What about your feelings when you learn English then?	**T** focuses back to the metaphor elicitation.
C:	是…	Is …	
T:	像什么?	Like what?	
C:	像, 像我妈妈和姥姥头发摸得软软的, 很轻松的感觉.	Like, like my mum and grandma's hair, it is soft when you touch it, feeling very light and relaxing.	**C** gave a metaphor and entailment from their own experience.
T:	哦, 那还像什么呢?	Oh, what else is it like?	**T** asked for more.
C:	还像那个看着英语可以摆的好多好多东西, 玩游戏也很开心的感觉.	Also like looking at English and putting lots of things there and the happy feeling of playing games.	**C** continued to give another metaphor and entailment, but the earlier words were a bit confusing.

4.4. Analysis methods for qualitative data

The analysis methods for metaphor and narrative data are specially discussed here, because the methods for analysing quantitative questionnaire data by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) is relatively clear and familiar to many researchers. Thus the results of quantitative data will be reported below without much prior discussion of the use of SPSS for quantitative data analysis.

4.4.1. Analysing metaphor data

The metaphor data has been analysed through four steps, to:

1. List all metaphors collected and identify any void data: if no metaphor or no entailment was given, these items were taken out of the data set; in this study, 114 (13 per cent) out of 850 (87 per cent) metaphor data was removed from the data set and 736 metaphors with entailments were used for data analysis.

2. Classify metaphors according to the meaning given by the children, e.g. putting all fruit metaphors into one category.

3. Analyse and categorise them according to the children's entailments.

4. Combine both metaphors and entailments to ascertain their internal relationships and to build up a conceptual framework, which may explain the attitudes to and perceptions of learning English by Chinese kindergarten children.

The report of the metaphor data gives both quantitative and qualitative findings.

4.4.2. Analysing narrative data

It has been a challenge to find research publications about children's structural development of narrative. Although there are detailed considerations of general narrative development (e.g. McCabe and Peterson, 1991; Bamberg, 1997), it seems that we do not know at what age a child is able to tell a story of their personal experience with what narrative elements or how a child is able to make a story coherent at specific ages. However, we are aware of what questions can be asked in order to explore narrative events (Cortazzi and Jin, 2006, 2007, 2012). Thus the identification of narratives in this study is based on the following criteria:

1. The narratives of learning English could be naturally occurring in the questionnaire item interview or elicited after the narrative interview questions or during the metaphor elicitation activity.

2. When the child referred to a particular event that happened in the past or to repeated events in a habitual way of learning English (e.g. how they memorise an English word).

After transcribing the data, the narratives were examined and narrative data was coded according to how the narratives reveal children's and/or parents' attitudes towards learning English and/or English teachers, as well as methods of learning English. The discussion is based on both quantitative and qualitative outcomes from the analysis.

5

Key findings and discussion

5.1. Demographic data

The participating kindergartens (see Table 2) in both urban and rural areas of the three chosen locations have been fully involved in this study. Three types of kindergartens (i.e. a model state kindergarten, and one each of the first and second ranks of state kindergartens) participated in this research in order to have a fuller representation of the data, although it has not been possible to have an equal number of types of kindergartens in each area (e.g. in Shanghai only the first rank kindergartens participated, whereas it was the first and second ranking kindergartens in Mudanjiang, but the model and the first rank in Changzhou). Due to ethical considerations, the team only included kindergartens willing to participate. The total number of participating children is 243 with an equal number of participants from the urban and rural areas and each location. The children in the first rank kindergartens make up over 50 per cent of the participating number. Ideally, each location would have recruited participants from the same types of kindergartens, but this was not possible. Proportionally the types of kindergartens in each location are varied. It would be difficult and perhaps unnecessary to find a balance of getting the same number of types of kindergartens to participate as well as matching the proportion of the types of kindergartens in each location. Nevertheless this is a point which can be improved in future.

Table 2: The number of participants from urban/rural areas and status types of kindergartens

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Area	Urban	40	40	43	123
	Rural	40	40	40	120
Kindergarten status	Model	0	0	43	43
	First rank	80	20	40	140
	Second rank	0	60	0	60

There is an almost equal number in both children's age groups and gender (see Table 3). As expected, the majority age groups of the parents or carers are between 25 and 40 years old. This means they are likely in work and may have limited time with their children. Educational levels of parents show that the overall number appears similar between the higher educational group (i.e. those with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree) and the lower educational group (i.e. their education is at the school level). However, in Shanghai nearly two-thirds of the parents belong to the higher educational group, while differences in the other two places are less striking.

The information about parents' jobs and income (see Table 4) suggests that this study includes people from all walks of life. The 'steady job' category refers to one or both parents who work for the government, state or private companies and joint ventures, from which they receive salaries; whereas an 'unsteady job' refers to one or both parents who may have temporary jobs, or work privately for themselves, and therefore their income is less stable and regular. However, it is important to point out that they would not sacrifice this educational opportunity, whether they have a steady income or not, as long as their child could enter a state kindergarten.

Table 3: The valid number of participating children with different age and gender in three cities

		City			Total/Average
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Age class	Middle	34	40	30	104
	(Months-age)	60.38	60.17	62.2	60.80
	Senior	39	40	34	113
	(Months-age)	72.59	68.95	74.68	71.93
Gender	Male	38	40	30	108
	Female	35	40	34	109

Table 4: The valid number of participating parents with background information

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Parent age	25–30 years old	8	5	15	28
	31–35 years old	38	44	30	112
	36–40 years old	20	22	14	56
	41–45 years old	7	4	5	16
	46–50 years old	0	3	0	3
	over 50 years old	0	2	0	2
Parent education	Low education	18	41	34	93
	High education	55	39	30	124
Parent occupation	Steady job	45	43	28	116
	Unsteady job	28	37	36	101
Household income	Low income	25	73	26	124
	High income	48	7	38	93

Further information (see Table 5) about learning resources provided to children from the participating families at home shows that parents are very keen to give as rich a learning environment as possible to their children, as clearly they are willing to set aside part of their income towards the education of their child. This can be seen from the numbers of toys, books and e-learning materials bought for their child. Fifty-four per cent of families surveyed have paid extra money monthly for their child to learn English. This trend was seen in all three cities, but in the more economically advanced cities of Shanghai and Changzhou more families were willing to pay more for learning English in their budget.

Table 5: Information about children's family provision of learning resources in three cities

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Main carers	Parents	57	54	66	177
	Grandparents	34	29	19	82
	Others	14	6	5	25
Children's toys	Electronic toys	54	49	49	152
	Natural patterns	35	31	22	88
	Intelligence toys	61	54	41	156
	Building blocks	61	54	41	156
	Electronic products	49	46	35	130
	Dolls	40	38	31	109
Children's magazines	0	28	37	39	104
	1–2	31	27	22	80
	3–4	10	13	1	24
	5–6	1	1	1	3
	7+	3	2	1	6
Children's presents	Food	68	58	39	165
	Clothes	60	77	43	180
	Toys	92	87	79	258
	Stationery	39	41	25	105
	Picture books	74	60	48	182
Children's CD-ROMs	0	9	11	10	30
	1–5	14	27	26	67
	6–15	11	19	5	35
	15–30	19	11	7	37
	30+	20	12	15	47

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Family play site	At home	26	26	16	68
	Shopping mall	21	8	15	44
	Amusement park	64	65	54	183
	Bookstore	25	22	14	61
	Museum	29	5	7	41
The cost of children learning English per month – RMB	0	10	40	20	70
	1–100	19	28	18	65
	101–500	18	9	14	41
	501–1,000	18	3	2	23
	over 1,000	7	0	4	11

Table 6 shows with whom these children learn English, namely kindergarten teachers, out-of-school class teachers and parents. The teaching involvement is prominent in Shanghai compared with the other two places, especially regarding learning from English teachers who teach classes out of school. The strong role of extra-curricular classes, compared with the regular kindergarten English classes, is confirmed by the figures for place of learning, particularly in Shanghai. For the age at which children begin to learn, some start before they are three, and most begin at three to four or four to five. It should be noted that all children involved in the study in Mudanjiang had experience of learning English because they were from kindergartens where English used to be taught in class or as an extra-curricular activity.

Table 6: Information about children's experience of learning English in three cities

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Experience of learning English	Experienced	67	80	47	194
	Inexperienced	6	0	17	23
English instructor	Kindergarten teacher	31	48	43	122
	Out-of-school class teacher	35	7	3	45
	Parent	27	21	13	61
	Peers	1	0	0	1
	Others	2	4	8	14
English learning place	Home	27	12	9	48
	Kindergarten	22	65	42	129
	Extra-curricular class	36	3	4	43
	Other place	0	0	7	7
Age began to learn English	0–3 years old	12	4	12	28
	3–4 years old	25	29	30	84
	4–5 years old	20	30	8	58
	5–6 years old	7	7	5	19
	6–7 years old	8	10	8	26

The learning of English skills (see Table 7) revealed that nearly 50 per cent of the children reportedly spent up to 30 minutes learning English daily; for this age group such regularity may be surprising (others answering 'never' means they learn English but not every day). The main activity overall seemed to be listening to English songs for two-thirds of the children. Less than 50 per cent of the children were watching English cartoons (clearly more in Shanghai but fewer in rural Mudanjiang), and even fewer had read English books or had the opportunities to talk to a foreigner. Given that children are spending considerable time meeting the challenge of beginning reading in Chinese, it is interesting to see how some do read in English and, except for the very few in the rural location, how many do speak English with outsiders (foreigners).

Table 7: Information about the learning of English skills

		City			Total
		Shanghai	Mudanjiang	Changzhou	
Time to learn English every day	Never	17	46	14	77
	less than 30 minutes	46	32	26	104
	31–60 minutes	7	1	16	24
	61–120 minutes	0	1	1	2
	over 120 minutes	0	0	0	0
Listening to English songs	Yes	48	56	32	136
	No	17	24	21	62
Watching English cartoons	Yes	39	26	30	95
	No	27	54	24	105
Reading English books	Yes	16	12	13	41
	No	49	68	37	154
Talking with foreigners	Yes	31	4	24	59
	No	41	76	40	157

The demographic information above shows that on the whole both children and their families are committed to learning English from a young age in a variety of ways. It is important to note that as researchers the team are fully aware of the possible inaccuracy of the reports given by some parents regarding information about themselves and their child's learning of English. However, the collected data from a good number of participants shows clear trends in the situation for learning English and the experiences by kindergarten children in these three sites which, to a certain extent, represent different parts of China in terms of geographical location, econometrics, family finances and provision for children at home, and types of kindergartens.

The following sections examine questionnaire and interview data, including metaphors and narratives, by following the research questions set up for this project.

5.2. Attitudes of Chinese kindergarten English learners

5.2.1. Questionnaire findings

The overall result shows that kindergarten children involved in this study are positive about their learning of English. In the questionnaires, questions were asked on attitudes and motivations towards learning English. The analysis of these items on a three-point Likert scale shows how most mean scores are above two, with some high figures emerging. Table 8 shows that while children are positive overall towards learning English, our question on whether they would dislike learning English if they found it difficult shows quite strong agreement, indicating the importance of making the classes seem accessible or easy for these young learners.

Table 8: Attitudes towards the learning of English by children

	City	N	Mean	SD	X²(df)	P
23. Do you like learning English?	Shanghai	74	2.65	0.711	4.469(2)	0.107
	Mudanjiang	80	2.49	0.871		
	Changzhou	71	2.41	0.803		
26. Do you like to use English with foreigners?	Shanghai	74	2.31	0.843	23.51(2)**	0.000
	Mudanjiang	80	1.68	0.868		
	Changzhou	71	2.21	0.754		
27. Do you find it interesting to learn English?	Shanghai	74	2.73	0.647	2.433(2)	0.296
	Mudanjiang	80	2.51	0.857		
	Changzhou	71	2.72	0.565		
30. Do you dislike learning English if you find learning is hard?	Shanghai	74	2.47	0.815	1.213(2)	0.545
	Mudanjiang	80	2.35	0.915		
	Changzhou	71	2.37	0.779		
36. Do you like singing English songs?	Shanghai	74	2.57	0.778	1.516(2)	0.469
	Mudanjiang	80	2.39	0.907		
	Changzhou	71	2.48	0.772		

** Extremely significant difference (P<0.001)

Table 8 shows that participants agreed with the questions asked, because the mean scores are between 2.21 and 2.72 when 3 indicates their highest agreement with the question, except one mean score which is 1.68. When P values are examined, it is seen that Question 26 has resulted in a high statistical significant outcome (with a P-value of 0.000) by the children from the three locations. This means they appeared to disagree with each other on this question.

In the following tables, all P-values achieving between P<0.05, P<0.01; and P<0.001 indicate the results are statistically significant. The smaller the number, the higher the statistical significance is.

The data also indicates that different areas have slightly different attitudes towards learning English: children in Mudanjiang appeared less positive than those in the other two areas, with noticeably lower scores about liking to use English with foreigners (a previous item showed they have far fewer opportunities for this). Further insights may be seen in their metaphor data (see Section 5.2.2).

There are close relationships between attitudes and motivations. It is likely that a strong motivation leads to positive attitudes, or vice versa. Some question items have been grouped broadly to see what motivates children to learn English. Table 9 shows how peer and parental influences are important for this age group of children learning English. It is interesting to observe the relatively lower responses by Mudanjiang children that are statistically significantly different for six items, e.g. 'Have your parents said learning English is important?' Possibly this may be due to the fact that this group of children have been in the kindergartens where English was taught as a part of the curriculum, thus by default their parents did not need to say to them that English was important (most Mudanjiang children think their parents will be happy if they learn English well). The same explanation may apply to question item 33, 'Do you learn English in order to play with your friends in class?' since the learning of English in Mudanjiang kindergartens surveyed was a part of routine class activities and not play with peers. The finding of parental influences seems to match research done by others in China (e.g. Li, 2005, 2011) that parents' views on learning English and learning in general are important. The extremely high mean scores for Shanghai children (higher on all these items but notably for items 25 and 29) shows the strength of learning attitudes there related to peers and parents; also of note, item 38 shows remarkably early awareness of possible opportunities for study abroad via English.

Table 9: Possible motivations of children towards learning English

|	City	N	Mean	SD	X²(df)	P
24. Do you want to learn English if your friends learn English?	Shanghai	74	2.76	0.615	2.999(2)	0.223
	Mudanjiang	80	2.69	0.722		
	Changzhou	71	2.62	0.676		
25. Do you want to learn English well if your friends learn English well?	Shanghai	74	2.95	0.327	15.652 (2)**	0.000
	Mudanjiang	80	2.75	0.666		
	Changzhou	71	2.68	0.580		
28. Have your parents said learning English is important?	Shanghai	74	2.45	0.846	22.535(2)**	0.000
	Mudanjiang	80	1.71	0.957		
	Changzhou	71	2.11	0.903		
29. Will your parents be happy if you learn English well?	Shanghai	74	2.93	0.302	6.940(2)*	0.031
	Mudanjiang	80	2.66	0.728		
	Changzhou	71	2.83	0.414		
32. Do you still want to learn English if it is not taught in your kindergarten?	Shanghai	74	2.74	0.598	5.639(2)	0.060
	Mudanjiang	80	2.45	0.884		
	Changzhou	71	2.48	0.790		
33. Do you learn English in order to play with your friends in class?	Shanghai	74	2.47	0.879	22.246(2)**	0.000
	Mudanjiang	80	1.75	0.948		
	Changzhou	71	2.14	0.899		
35. Do you ask questions to your teacher or parents about English?	Shanghai	74	2.73	0.647	14.222(2)*	0.001
	Mudanjiang	80	2.19	0.969		
	Changzhou	71	2.45	0.824		
38. Do you study English because you want to go abroad?	Shanghai	74	2.22	0.911	6.151(2)*	0.046
	Mudanjiang	80	1.89	0.968		
	Changzhou	71	1.90	0.831		

* Significant difference (0.01<P<0.05),
** Extremely significant difference (P<0.001)

5.2.2. Metaphor data examining children's attitudes to learning English

The total number of 736 metaphors with entailments has shown a positive attitude (50.4 per cent) towards learning English, while metaphors with negative attitudes are 13.3 per cent. The rest are metaphors with neutral meanings, showing no preference in attitudes, but some awareness of their knowledge, shapes, colours or developing awareness of English as a different language. Among all metaphors, it appears that there are two major types (food and animals) and the rest are minor types with smaller numbers (see Figure 1: animals, food relating to their tastes, shapes and colours and the rest of the types of metaphors). They use these to express their knowledge, preference, likeness and other feelings. The use of these metaphors may be related to their life experience and familiar aspects in cognitive and affective development. The analysis of the metaphors was coded according to positive, negative, neutral or unexplained to identify any overall attitudinal tendency among these children.

Figure 1: Types of metaphor
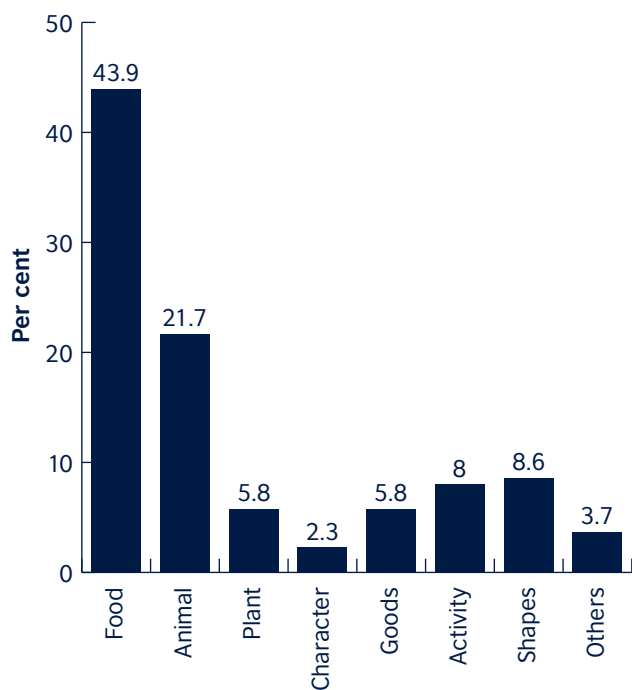
There are 161 metaphors (21.7 per cent of the total number) that use animals as sources to focus a comparison with learning English. The top five animals used are tiger, rabbit, elephant, panda and monkey (see Figure 2). Table 10 shows how children use these animals to express their attitudes, feelings and perceptions in relation to learning English. They have given both positive and negative entailments to all animals except to the panda. This may suggest that they have established a sense of national pride from this age, since a panda is a powerful symbol worldwide and could only be related to positive things in China.

Table 10 shows how most animal metaphors express positive attitudes (it is liked, interesting, precious, lovely or fun) although there are a number of metaphors classified as neutral and a few as negative because learning English is hard, difficult or disliked. The frequency of tiger and rabbit metaphors is notable: these are both animals of the Chinese zodiac, and a tiger traditionally symbolises courage, bravery, loyalty, protection and enthusiasm, while a rabbit represents long life, benevolence, discretion and luck but is mysterious. It is unclear how far these young learners are aware of such adult symbols (Eberhart, 1986; Aubier, 1988) but, like the elephant and panda, they appear regularly in kindergarten culture and are clearly familiar to the children. The general further reading into the metaphors gives strong support to show that children's awareness towards English at that age is a phenomenon worth investigating and indicates that metaphor analysis is potentially an effective approach to do this.

These children paid attention to the shapes of English letters. This may be derived from Chinese language learning in China, where formation of written characters and memorisation of words are much emphasised, and this may influence awareness of letter shapes and spelling in English. This point may also be used to explain fruit metaphors in the neutral category in Table 11.
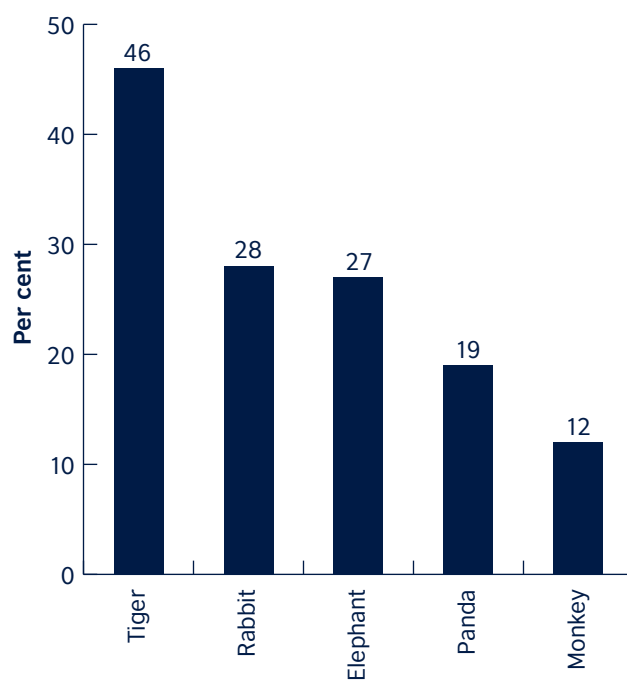
Figure 2: Animal metaphors

Table 10: Examples of animal metaphors and their coding

Metaphor	Entailment	Attitude	Theme	No.
Tiger 46	Because I like a tiger. English looks like a tiger.	Positive	Like	19
	It's hard to learn English. A tiger is hard to reach. It has ability.	Negative	Dislike/hard	10
	Because a picture in the tree looks like some English letters.	Neutral	Image	14
	Because a tiger can change colour.	Unexplained	Ability	3
Rabbit 28	A rabbit is lovely. I like it. A rabbit is white and lovely. I like it most.	Positive	Like	23
	Some rabbits are fat, some letters are round.	Neutral	Round/shapes	3
	Because we can see some rabbits in the forest.	Unexplained	Vision	2
Elephant 27	Because an elephant has a long nose. It's interesting.	Positive	Interesting	7
	Because it's hard to learn English. The difficulty is as big as an elephant.	Negative	Difficulty	3
	Because an elephant is black too.	Neutral	Black/colour	16
	Learning English is like riding an elephant, I rode an elephant in Thailand.	Unexplained	Relaxation	1
Panda 19	A panda is a national animal in China. It's precious and important. A panda is lovely and English is fun.	Positive	Importance Love	9
	Because the teacher looks like a panda in speaking English. She is heavy.	Neutral	Vision	6
	Because a panda likes to eat a bamboo.	Unexplained	Like	4
Monkey 12	I like monkey.	Positive	Like	5
	Learning English is like a monkey, because a monkey wants to climb a tree. Learning English is hard.	Negative	Hard	3
	Because a monkey has an English word.	Neutral	Language awareness	4

The type with the most used metaphors (323 out of the total number) is food, which is about 44 per cent of all metaphors produced. This category also relates to children's cognitive and emotional development revealed in their entailments. The production of metaphors by using food may be also related to Chinese or Eastern cultures in which cooking and food are important home activities and people's relationships are often established through dinner invitations and activities. A similar outcome of using food as a metaphor to compare their attitude towards learning English has also been seen in the findings from the investigation into the attitudes of Chinese primary school children towards learning English (Jin et al., 2014b). The choice of fruit and other food items (a bitter melon, bread, cake, biscuit, etc.) may also be influenced by the pictures and plastic/wood models we provided to elicit their data. Among all the fruit metaphors (see Figure 3), all children gave a positive association by relating a peach to the learning of English; the other fruit or food metaphors may be related to positive or negative, depending on their individual preference in food (see examples in Table 11). But more children chose bitter melon for a negative association, since it tastes bitter. They expressed this as: 'Learning English is like bitter melon, I feel bitter, because it is hard work (in Chinese the word hard describing work also means bitter) to learn English.' However, some children did say: 'Learning English is like bitter melon which we should eat every day, because it is good for our health,' which indicates that learning English every day is good for our study (and these examples show the necessity to elicit an entailment for metaphor research). This is an influence of Chinese culture by a common saying that one can achieve above others if they can endure the hardship. It seems that this belief is already embedded in children's thinking in relation to learning from this young age. Fruit metaphors again show the salience of English letter shapes for these learners.
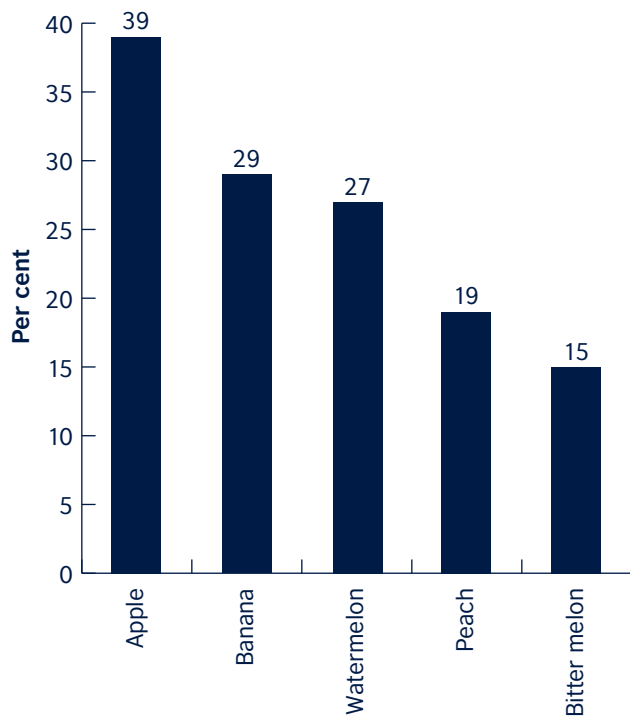
Figure 3: Fruit metaphors

Table 11: Examples of fruit metaphors with entailment

Metaphor	Entailment	Attitude	Theme	No.
Apple 39	Because apple is red, sweet and good for health.	Positive	Sweet/health	20
	Because apple tastes crispy, a little hard. I used to love to eat it, but not now.	Negative	Dislike/hard	2
	Apple is round. Some English letters are round too.	Neutral	Round/shapes	15
	There is a triangle, looks like the heart of an apple.	Unexplained	Triangle/shapes	2
Banana 29	Because banana is sweet and delicious.	Positive	Sweet/delicious	14
	Because many initials are round, curve. It's hard.	Negative	Difficulty/complex	2
	Because my teacher told me this word 'banana'.	Neutral	Language awareness	17
Watermelon 27	English is as sweet as watermelon. I like to eat it best, so I like English. I like to eat watermelon. It's sweet. I want to eat it every day.	Positive	Sweet/like	16
	Cutting watermelon is hard, just like speaking English is difficult.	Negative	Hard/difficulty	2
	Because watermelon is whole, round and big.	Neutral	Shapes	9
Peach 19	Peach is sweet, soft and delicious. I like to eat peach and often taste it.	Positive	Sweet/soft/delicious Like	19
Bitter melon 15	Learning English is like bitter melon, because it is good for health. I want to eat it every day.	Positive	Like	2
	Learning English is like bitter melon, because English is hard to study, just like bitter melon is bitter. Learning English is like bitter melon. Because English is most difficult for me, I feel it bitter.	Negative	Hard/bitter	10
	Learning English is like bitter melon, because bitter melon looks like a cucumber.	Neutral	Image	3

The remaining metaphor categories have shown the same pattern that children name the same metaphor for both positive and negative connotations for learning English. Overall, they have shown a positive attitude. Comparing metaphors with their questionnaire answers, the metaphor data shows that their answers are more sophisticated, with thoughtful reasons to support their views for both positive and negative associations.

5.3. Perceived English learning experiences

5.3.1. Questionnaire data findings

This study examined the attitudes of those children who had English lessons and those who did not attend any English classes. The questionnaire data (see Table 12) shows that those who attended an English class held a more positive attitude to learning English compared with those who did not have one. The statistical difference is significant between the two groups; however, as shown in Table 12, the overall picture is positive.

When the data was examined further, it appears that in Shanghai children showed a positive attitude in both groups without a statistically significant difference (Shanghai Z=0.306, P=0.759); the same statistical result appeared in Mudanjiang data since all participants attended English class. However, in Changzhou this difference between experienced learners and inexperienced learners is strongly statistically significant (Changzhou Z=3.731, P=0.000). This indicates children's experience of English learning may have encouraged them to like learning English at this age.

5.3.2. Metaphor analysis examining children's perceptions and described behaviour of their learning of English.

The metaphor analysis looks into the entailments to see the children's cognitive, affective and behavioural perceptions towards their learning of English. The cognitive category (see Table 13) refers to children's references to sensation, life knowledge, description, shape, colour and degree of easiness or difficulty to express their experience and attitudes to learning English.

Table 14 indicates that children used more metaphors and entailments in the types of description of an object, their life knowledge about animals or the environment, shapes and colours of things, and their sensation towards objects. The degree of difficulty and easiness has the smallest percentages, perhaps due to their stage of cognitive development, in that a more abstract concept such as easier or more difficult is harder for them to judge or express. However, the examples shown in this type actually demonstrated their ability to think in a dynamic way. Similar examples have been found in comparing Y3 with Y1 children in primary school where Y3 tended to give more complex thoughts that show their greater maturity in thinking than Y1 children (Jin et al., 2014b). For instance, 89 per cent of the metaphors with ambivalent entailments were given by Y3 children, e.g. a Y3 child said: English learning is 'A torrential river, because sometimes it (English) is difficult to learn; it blocks your way. However, if you learn it with a willing heart, you can cross the river safely' (*ibid*. p.14). This is a positive sign to show that children were learning to think in a more dynamic way rather than simply categorising everything as black and white.

The emotional category (see Table 15) presents four types of emotions – fear, happiness, loathing and love – while the behavioural category (see Table 16) is further classified into three types. They both indicate children's thoughts and feelings involved in learning English.

Table 12: Children's attitudes towards learning English – those with an English class and without

District	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Experienced	197	2.43	0.43	1.14	3.00	5.07(1)*	0.024
Inexperienced	28	2.26	0.43	1.43	3.00		

* Significant difference (0.01<P<0.05)

Table 13: Examples of metaphors and entailments in the cognitive category

Cognitive category	Examples of metaphors with entailments
Sensation	Peach tastes sweet. This is how I feel about the learning of English, sweet.
Life knowledge	Learning English is like an elephant, because it is hot in English class and the teacher is fat.
Description	It's like a flower, because flower is beautiful.
Shape	It's like a banana, because banana has a curved shape and many English letters are curved, many start with a C, it is difficult.
Colour	It's like black. All the English letters are black in our school.
Degree of easiness and difficulty	It's like the wind, sometimes it is hard; sometimes it is not hard.

Table 14: Metaphor and entailment types within the cognition category

Cognition	No.	Per cent
Sensation	69	14
Life knowledge	110	23
Description	125	26
Shape	89	18
Colour	59	12
Difficulty/easiness	36	7

Table 15: Examples of metaphors and entailments in the emotional category

Emotional category	Examples of metaphors with entailments
Fear	It's like a tiger. Big tigers make me scared.
Happiness	It's like eating a cake. Cake is nice and eating cakes make me happy.
Loathing	It's like biscuits. They are hard. I loathe learning English.
Love	Like a little rabbit. Rabbit is white and lovely. I love it.

Table 16: Examples of metaphors and entailments in the behavioural category

Behavioural category	Examples of metaphors with entailments
Study	It's like our foreign teachers. They always teach us to learn new words.
Fun	It's like going to funfairs, very happy.
Action	It's like talking, looking at the teacher and talk with others.

Asking children to express their thoughts using a metaphor may have pushed them to think harder and relate to their knowledge, emotion and experiences. In the emotional category by far the most expressed type is love for learning English (see Figure 4), in both age groups.

Figure 4: Distribution of four types of emotional category by age groups
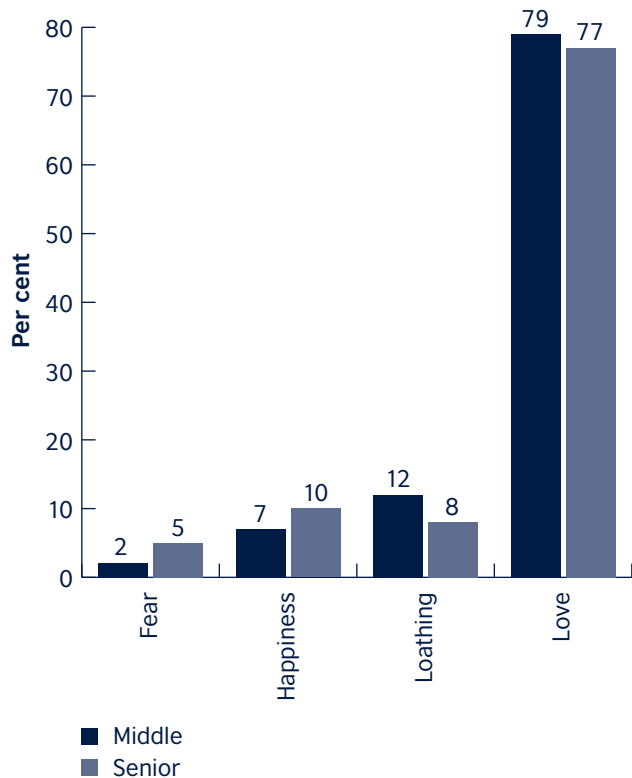
The high frequency of positive emotions towards English demonstrated in metaphors through the entailments shows children's enthusiasm towards learning at this age. Other research indicates that younger children tend to have a more positive attitude towards learning English than their older peers (e.g. Li, 2011) and the older ones could see how learning English became harder when they stopped learning through games and singing songs (Jin et al., 2014b). So it is important for educators to identify solutions that will maintain children's enthusiasm as they get older.

Figure 5 and Table 17 show that the majority (66 per cent) of the metaphors with entailment are classified into the cognitive group. It appears that children tended to use nouns to give their answers rather than using verbs, which may have led to the lower percentages within the behavioural category of metaphors with entailments, like answers such as 'Ride a bike, I am happy'. These answers were rarer than using nouns to respond.

Figure 5: Percentages of the three categories of entailments

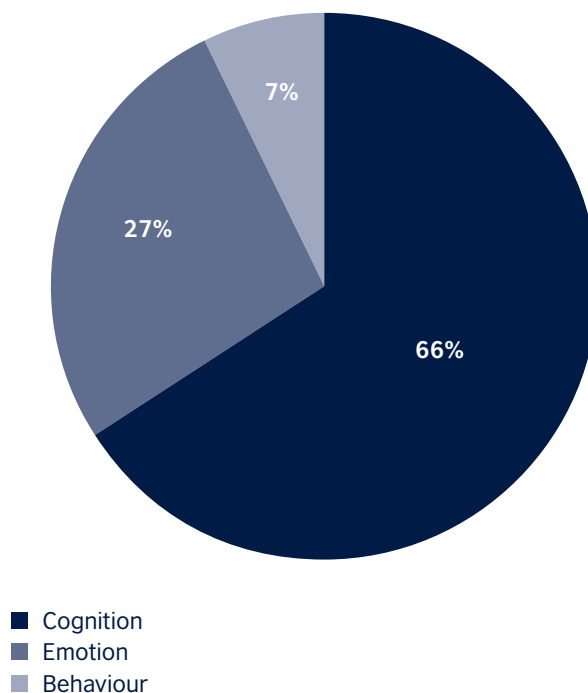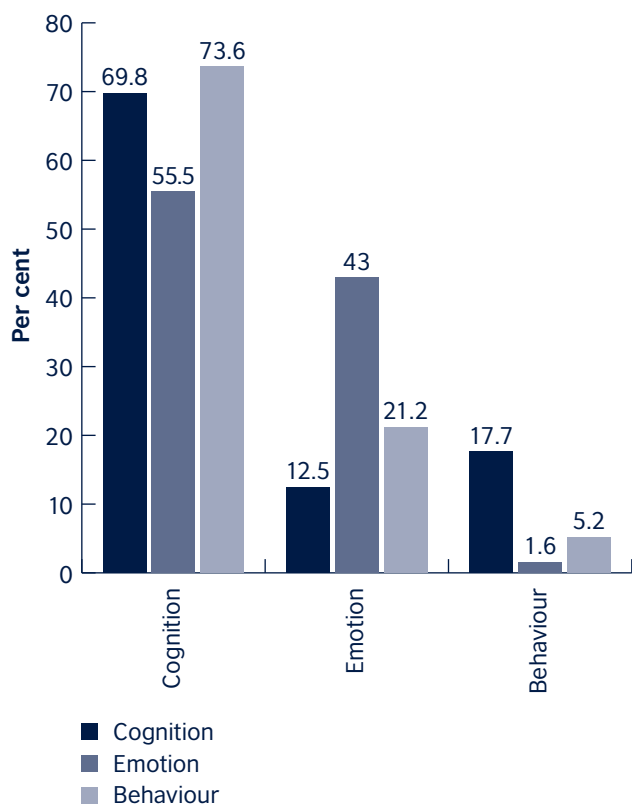**Table 17:** Distribution of metaphors' entailments into three categories by locations

Location	Cognition	Emotion	Behaviour
Shanghai	134	24	34
Mudanjiang	142	110	4
Changzhou	212	61	15
Total	488	195	53

Figure 6: Differences between three categories of metaphor with entailments in three locations


There are some differences among different locations in this study. Figure 6 shows the considerable discrepancy in the metaphors belonging to emotions and behaviour: Mudanjiang children used metaphors in the emotional category proportionally more than those in other areas, but used behavioural metaphors the least. This phenomenon needs further study to find out reasons for this outcome: how children in these locations develop their language competence, if and how learning English experiences reinforced their emotional responses, whether their prescribed curriculum has a different emphasis or whether researchers need to elicit data differently. Overall, their metaphors have revealed that all the children in this study have experienced cognitive, emotional and behavioural awareness and development in learning English, and this is shown in how they talk about this learning with metaphors.

5.3.3. An example of a conceptual framework showing children's perception and experience of learning English from the analysis of metaphor data

The relationship between metaphor and thought (e.g. Ortony, 1993; Gibbs, 2008) has been substantially studied to show that metaphors can reveal the deep thoughts of participants on a concept. Figure 7 has put together key metaphors of fruit and animals with entailments to present a partial analysis of the metaphors and entailments given by the children about their learning of English attitudes and experiences. One possible conceptual framework that may be seen is that these children are able to see learning English as dynamic. The metaphors present a picture that ELL is good, interesting, fun and they feel they love it, but they also experience some hardship or anticipate possible hard work in their future learning of English. Such conceptual frameworks from metaphors have been found in other studies with older Chinese learners (e.g. Jin and Cortazzi, 2011) and learners of other countries (e.g. Cortazzi et al., 2015) or teachers (e.g. Cortazzi et al., 2009; Jin and Cortazzi, in press) but not previously with this age group.

Figure 7: A metaphor conceptual framework for 'Learning is dynamic'
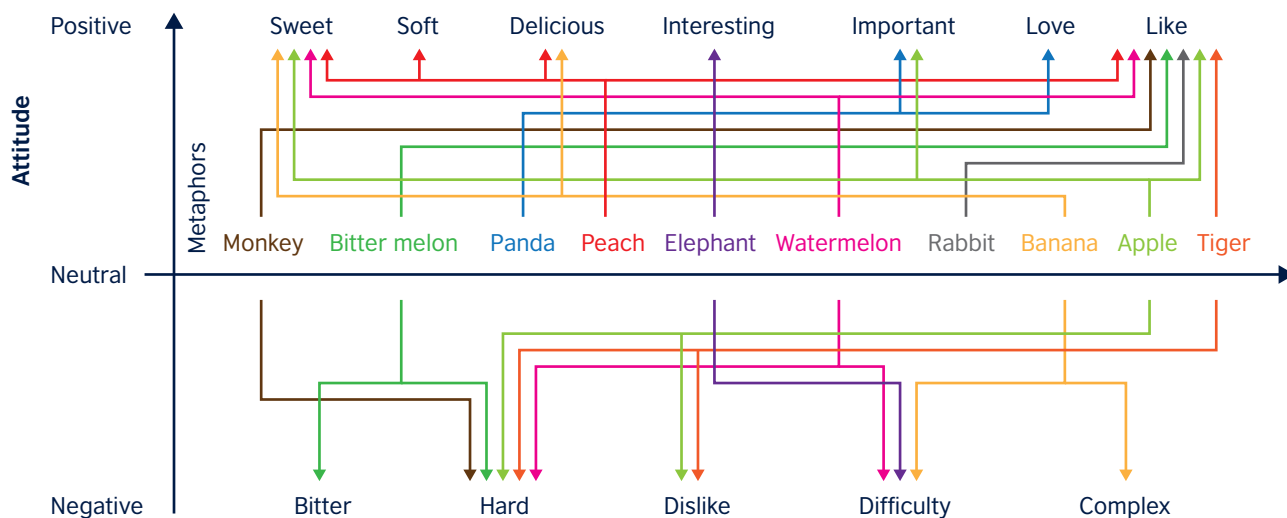
The dynamic thought shown in their learning of English experience is a commendable achievement within their cognitive and affective development. Children are able to use their experience in learning to generate their ideas or assessment of learning situations, which can help them prepare for learning psychologically and educationally. It would be interesting to find out if they have similar judgements towards other subject learning beyond ELL and towards learning in general.

5.3.4 Narrative data revealing experiences of children's learning of English

The narrative data occurred when questions requested the participating children to describe any learning English experiences as well as when they were answering other interview questions. It is a challenge, as explained in Sections 4.2 and 4.4.2, to define if a child gave narratives strictly according to Labov's model (1982). However, this study has followed the criteria that a narrative is warranted if the content contains a description of what the participating children have experienced or an action habitually exists in their learning events. Tables 18 and 19 present the analysis under the themes identified, while the examples shown in each sub-theme of narratives represent similar expressions, revealing the same meaning said by children.

Following the narrative identification criteria, 794 narratives are found from the interview data and two themes are recognised with a further classification of themes within. Table 18 has revealed a similar finding with questionnaire and metaphor data that Chinese kindergarten children are influenced by their parents' views on learning English. Interestingly, they showed their awareness of their parents' views from their narratives and they also remembered their parents' preferences in learning English. The parental involvement and resource support in experiences of

learning English have also played an important role. Children mentioned 95 times this aspect of their experience of learning English. Teachers have been recognised in narratives (83 times) that their ways of teaching and giving rewards to children have also encouraged kindergarten children to experience happiness and fun in the learning of English. Peer pressure was also explicitly stated, although the number was not high. It would be useful to explore further if this reveals peer pressure, competitiveness or something else.

The cognitive and emotional aspects of the experience of learning English can be seen in Table 19, where children mentioned their positive feelings in learning English; not only did they recognise difficulties in learning English, but also their ways of dealing with these difficulties. This finding is a step further in showing that their perception of learning is dynamic with their initiative to ascertain solutions. The high number mentioning their English learning methods indicates they are developing learning English strategies and are conscious of their own ways of learning. It would be very useful to feed this back to teachers and parents in order to guide children more effectively in their learning of English and share good practices recognised by children.

The narrative revealed here has given us the information and evidence not to undermine children's perceptions, thoughts, understanding of their own learning and cognitive/emotional development from learning. Future research needs to explore further both the narrative design and methods for eliciting data from young children, but also to expand the use of narrative analysis into more aspects of understanding learning.

Table 18: Narrative data revealing people who influence children's English learning

Those having influence on children	Aspects of influences	Examples of narratives	No. of narratives
Parents	Perceived degrees of importance	Mum said English is important, I want to learn English.	78
		My parents didn't say English is important. So I don't want to learn English.	24
	Requirement	My mum said that I'll learn English in primary school.	6
		Dad and Mum said that I must learn English.	62
	Support with resources	Dad and Mum bought me English picture books.	15
	Participation	Mum teaches me English at home.	80
Teacher	Interesting lessons and fun	I like English teacher, the class is fun.	39
	Praises and encouragement	When I read the words correctly, my teacher gave me an award and stickers.	44
Peers	Peer pressure	Wei Wei has been learning English, so I should learn English.	13

Table 19: Narrative data about cognitive and emotional learning experiences of English by kindergarten children

Cognitive and emotional experiences	Aspects of experiences	Narrative examples	No. of narratives
Fun	Like	English is fun. I like learning English.	138
	Dislike	English is too hard; I don't like learning English.	70
Strategy for overcoming difficulties	Asking for help	I asked my teacher or other children when I came across unknown words.	38
	Being independent	I solved problems by myself when I didn't know the content.	15
Motivation	Going abroad	I can go abroad after I learn English.	23
Coping well	Easy	English is so simple; English is easy to learn.	34
Desire	Desire to learn	I have wanted to learn English.	36
Methods of learning	Reading books and watching videos	At home I have been watching cartoons to learn English.	67
No English	No knowledge of English	I have never learned English before, I know nothing about English.	12

5.4. The impact of parental attitudes to children's learning of English, and similarities and differences in three locations

This study aims to find out the role and impact of parents on their children's learning of English. It is known that parents in China play a crucial role in their children's learning (Tang, 2008; Zhou and Li, 2010; Zhou and Jin, 2012). Parents invest an enormous amount of educational resources, financial support, family time and emotional and psychological input into their child's educational achievements. This section looks into parents' attitudes first in four themes and then examines other social, personal and family factors.

5.4.1 An overall view of four themes regarding parents' attitudes to the learning of English

The survey conducted here contains 29 questions categorised into four broad themes: parents' attitudes towards children's learning of English, parents' motivations for their children learning English; their views on English learning methods and reasons against the learning of English in preschool years. A five-point Likert scale was used from 1 for totally disagree to 5 for completely agree. Table 20 shows that parents in three cities have supportive attitudes towards English learning by their children. Further, it appears that their attitude matches children's views on learning English. This could be interpreted that parents do have an influence on the thinking of their children in this matter.

When the specific question items are examined, some individual differences can be seen between responses to questions by parents in different cities. Figures 8 to 11 present some similarities and differences in the four broad themes.

Figure 8 strongly indicates that overall parents are keen for their children to learn English from kindergarten age, although different areas tend to have different preferences. Parents in Shanghai appear to have a stronger supportive attitude towards their children learning English, which is not surprising since Shanghai is such a metropolitan and international city. In Mudanjiang, parents appeared to be comparatively lower in their scores, i.e. agreed less with the statements. This may be due to the fact that their children were already all in kindergartens where English was taught. They either had supported the idea of learning English or they had no choice in the curriculum subjects offered in the kindergartens.

Table 20: Parents' attitude to their children's learning of English between different cities

City	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Shanghai	70	3.61	.35	2.27	4.62	2.939(2)	0.23
Mudanjiang	80	3.51	.33	2.73	4.46		
Changzhou	77	3.59	.39	3.00	4.92		

Figure 8: Parents' attitudes to children's learning of English

	53. You believe learning English is very important	54. You believe for children learning English the earlier they start the better	56. You believe learning English should start from kindergarten	58. You encourage your child to learn English	60. Even if your child is not willing to learn English, you still insist they learn it
Shanghai	4.19	3.75	3.91	4.24	3.41
Mudanjiang	3.79	3.33	3.50	3.99	3.25
Changzhou	4.07	3.84	3.88	4.13	3.27

Figure 9: Parents' motivations for supporting children's learning of English

	55. Other Children learn English, so does my child	57. You want your child to go abroad in the future	63. You want your child to be able to speak to foreigners	67. You want your child to learn more languages	70. You believe learning English is very important, because English is compulsory in exams when they go to school	71. You believe learning English well can find you a good job	72. You believe learning English can help children's international vision	73. English is very useful for travelling abroad	78. You believe English is only used as a tool	79. Children studying English is for passing future exams
Shanghai	3.01	3.44	4.22	4.08	3.03	3.23	4.19	4.30	3.99	2.58
Mudanjiang	3.03	3.46	3.91	3.88	3.20	3.14	3.71	4.03	3.84	2.94
Changzhou	3.23	3.43	4.13	4.08	3.44	3.38	4.06	4.20	3.43	2.85

Figure 10: Parents' views on English learning methods for children

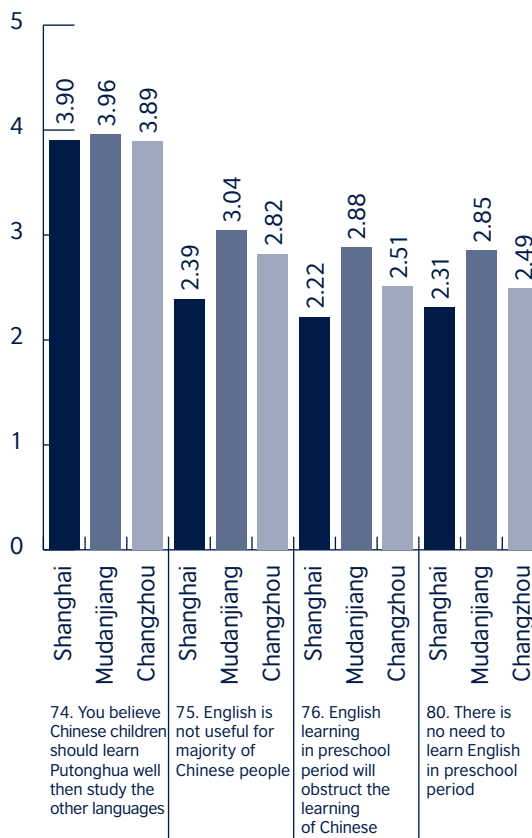|	59. You set up a goal for your child			61. Your child spends more time in English than in Chinese			64. You are willing to send your child to some English Learning Class			65. You believe kindergarten should have English Class			66. You are willing to learn English with your child			68. You will teach English to your child			69. You are willing to buy English picture books for your child			77. You help your child learn English songs		

Figure 9 shows a similar trend that parents in Shanghai were highly in favour of statements 63, 67, 72 and 73. This similarity is supported by views of parents in Changzhou, whose views were more similar to those of Shanghai than parents in Mudanjiang. However, whereas Shanghai parents appeared to have a pragmatic attitude regarding learning English (shown in responses to items 78 and 79 where English is seen as a tool or for passing future exams), this was not evident in item 57 (about going abroad in future). Again, further studies are needed to find out reasons for the responses of parents in all three locations.

Parents' responses in Figure 10 reveal that they did not think their child spent more time learning English than Chinese and that they were willing to spend time with their child learning English and provide English learning resources. This is also seen in the earlier discussion that two-thirds of the participating parents paid monthly for their child's English learning costs. Clearly it is parents in Shanghai who appeared to have stronger views on the English learning methods than parents in the other two locations.

Some parents did give their reasons against learning English for their child (see Figure 11). They tended to be in favour of learning Putonghua well before English. On the surface it seemed to contradict their responses to other questions in which they showed their support for learning English. However, when they were put into the context of comparing learning Chinese, they might still support the learning of Putonghua more in preschool years than learning English.

Figure 11: Views of parents against children learning English

74. You believe Chinese children should learn Putonghua well then study the other languages			75. English is not useful for majority of Chinese people			76. English learning in preschool period will obstruct the learning of Chinese			80. There is no need to learn English in preschool period		

The interpretation of their responses is general and broad. Not all the responses could be explained with satisfaction without further investigation. Their answers raise more questions for future research.

5.4.2 Parents' attitudes by examining their social, personal and family factors

This section focuses on the further examination of parents' attitudes to English learning by looking into other factors such as their educational background, family income, age range of children, children's gender, and the English learning experience.

Parents' educational background is said to have some influence on children's attitudes and achievement in learning English (Zhou and Jin, 2012). The parents with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree had a more positive attitude ($P<0.05$) in supporting their child to learn English than those with a lower educational qualification (see Table 21). This may be due to the higher expectation on their child from parents with university degrees. They may also spend more time with their child learning English.

But within Shanghai there is a statistical difference ($Z=2.593$, $P=0.010$) in attitudes between parents with different educational backgrounds. However, there are no significant differences within Changzhou ($Z=0.772$, $P=0.440$) and Mudanjiang ($Z=0.665$, $P=0.506$) respectively. This might be interpreted that there are bigger differences in educational backgrounds of parents in Shanghai, a global metropolitan city. It inevitably has a more highly educated workforce. In contrast, in Changzhou and Mudanjiang, the number of parents with better educational qualifications or a higher degree may be lower and fewer than parents in Shanghai.

Family income as a factor shows a statistically significant difference for higher income families to have a stronger support attitude to learning English by their child. Financially, it would be easier for a higher income family to send their child for extra-curricular study and be able to afford to provide more learning resources. However, it is interesting to notice that the income factor has no statistical significance within each location, e.g. Shanghai with $Z=0.345$, $P=0.730$, Mudanjiang with $Z=0.785$, $P=0.433$, Changzhou with $Z=1.644$, $P=0.100$.

Table 21: Parents' educational background in relation to their attitude to their child's learning of English

Types	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Low educational	99	3.54	0.39	2.73	4.92	2.96(1)	0.085
High educational	128	3.59	0.33	2.27	4.62		

Table 22: Family income factor to parents' attitudes to their child's learning of English

Types	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Low income	132	3.55	0.36	2.73	4.92	1.695(1)	0.193
High income	95	3.60	0.36	2.27	4.62		

It may reveal more information (Table 23 and Figure 12) by showing the data result of parents' attitude to learning English between urban and rural areas of the three locations. Overall, there is no statistical significance between urban and rural parents' views towards English learning. This indicates both urban and rural parents are supportive about their children learning English.

Figure 12: Attitude of urban and rural parents to their children learning English in three locations
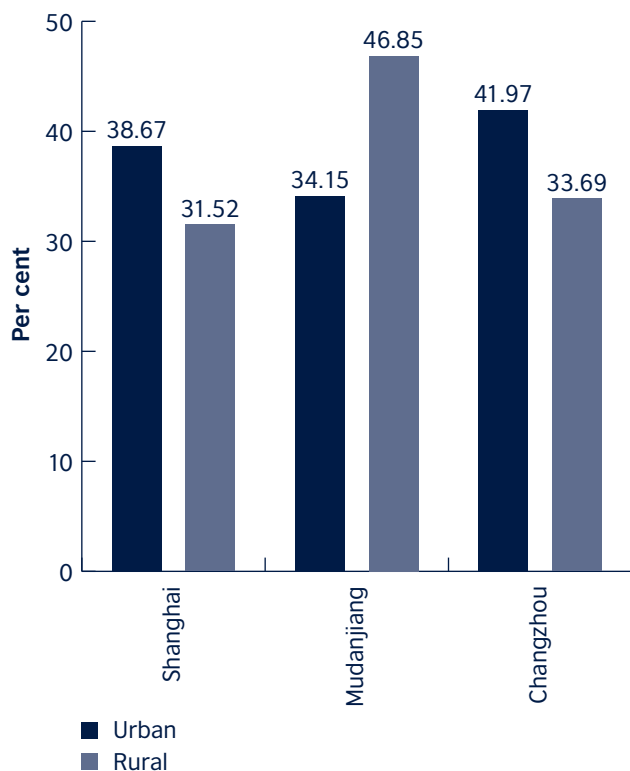
After further examination of the data into individual locations, the picture (see Figure 12) is changed so that urban parents in Shanghai and Changzhou (Shanghai with Z=1.462, P=0.144, Changzhou with Z=1.645, P=0.100) have a more positive attitude than rural parents; in contrast, rural parents in Mudanjiang have a more positive attitude than urban parents (Mudanjiang with Z=2.448, P=0.014).

When parents who have children with different age classes were compared, there is no statistical significance in their attitudes to learning English (see Table 24). This may indicate that parents did not have a strong view about which age group should learn English, although some expressed that they did not support learning English from preschool age. This may be due to the influence of peers and they might not have a choice if their child was in a kindergarten where English was taught. Similarly, the gender of participating parents has no impact on their attitudes to their child's learning of English (see Table 25).

Table 25 provides some evidence that the participating parents have an equal attitude, supporting their child no matter whether it is a girl or boy. This tendency is also true in all three individual locations (Shanghai Z=1.894, P=0.058, Mudanjiang Z=0.901, P=0.367, Changzhou Z=1.458, P=0.145). This indicates that parents have a supportive and positive attitude for their child to learn English with no preference in gender.

The comparison in Table 26 appears to show that the positive attitude from parents whose child had some English learning experience is higher with no statistical significance than those parents whose child had no English learning experience. This may be understood to mean that parents who sent their child to learn English have already had a preference for learning English, which leads to their positive beliefs and attitudes. The analysis of individual locations also matches well with the overall tendency that parents of children who themselves had had experiences of learning English are more positive than those who had no English learning experience.

Table 23: Differences in parents' attitude to their child's learning of English between urban and rural areas

Areas	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Urban	119	3.56	0.35	2.27	4.46	0.077(1)	0.781
Rural	108	3.57	0.36	3.00	4.92		

Table 24: Differences in parents' attitude to their children learning English between different age classes

Kindergarten grade	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Middle	116	3.54	0.40	2.27	4.92	2.21(1)	0.137
Senior	111	3.60	0.30	2.92	4.46		

Table 25: Parents' attitude to gender of children learning English

Gender of children	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Male	114	3.58	0.35	2.27	4.92	0.268(1)	0.605
Female	113	3.56	0.36	2.73	4.62		

Table 26: Parents' attitude to the learning of English between children with different learning experiences

Learning experience	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Experienced	197	3.57	0.34	2.27	4.62	2.52(1)	0.113
Inexperienced	30	3.52	0.43	3.00	4.92		

5.5. Similarities and differences of Chinese kindergarten children's attitudes to ELL between urban and rural/suburban areas and between inland and peripheral locations

The similarity and differences in parents' attitudes have revealed some interesting outcomes shown in section 5.4. This section focuses on the similarities and differences of kindergarten children's attitudes to ELL through their questionnaire and metaphor data.

5.5.1. Similarities and differences of attitudes to ELL in urban/rural and inland/peripheral locations by questionnaire data

When the children's answers are compared, it shows children in Shanghai may have the highest positive attitudes to learning English, those in Changzhou have a higher score than Mudanjiang (Table 27) and their differences in answers have shown a high statistical significance. There might be a number of explanations for the differences. Shanghai is one of the most international cities in China. The globalised environment may have facilitated the desire and demand for learning English. Changzhou is very close to Shanghai and the influence from Shanghai may have created their higher positive attitude. Mudanjiang still has a high positive attitude to learning English, but it is the lowest among the three. This might be because they are further away from big metropolitan cities. They are in a relatively quiet and peripheral city. It could also be that they have all been studying English and it is not something new and fresh in their mind. This may also match with the idea that learning is dynamic, because after they experienced English learning, they may see both happy and positive aspects as well as harder and less interesting aspects.

It is interesting to note that overall there is no statistical significance in attitude to learning English between urban and rural children (see Table 28). However, when individual locations are further examined, the results show that children in Changzhou did present a p-value showing statistical significance between urban and rural areas in their attitudes towards the learning of English, in which urban children expressed a much higher positive attitude to learning English than rural peers (Changzhou Z=0.3.891 P=0.000; Shanghai Z=0.914, P=0.361; Mudanjiang Z=1.623, P=0.105).

Figure 13: Attitude of urban and rural parents to their children learning English in three locations
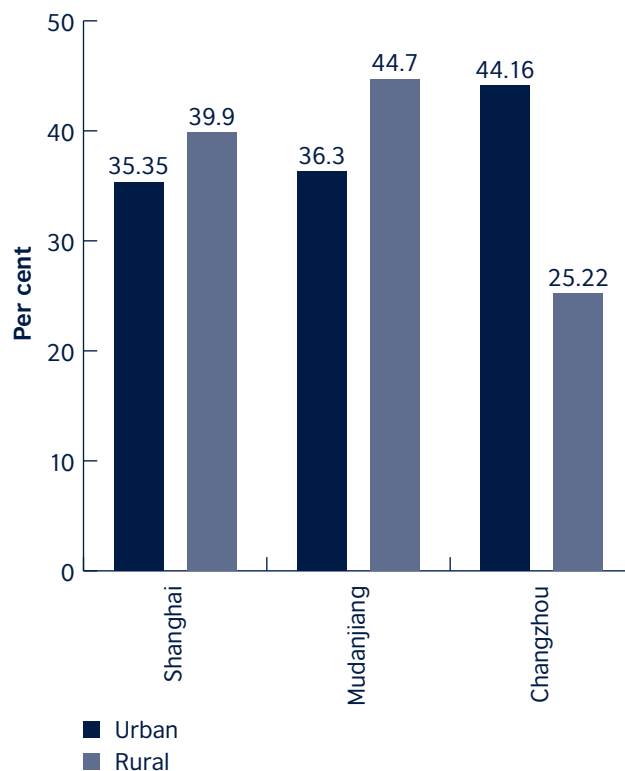
Gender comparison results present no statistical significance between boys and girls in their attitudes to learning English (Table 29). However, when the data from different locations was explored, girls in Mudanjiang showed a higher positive attitude with a statistical significance than boys (Z=2.371, P=0.018; see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Gender data about the different attitudes to learning English in three locations
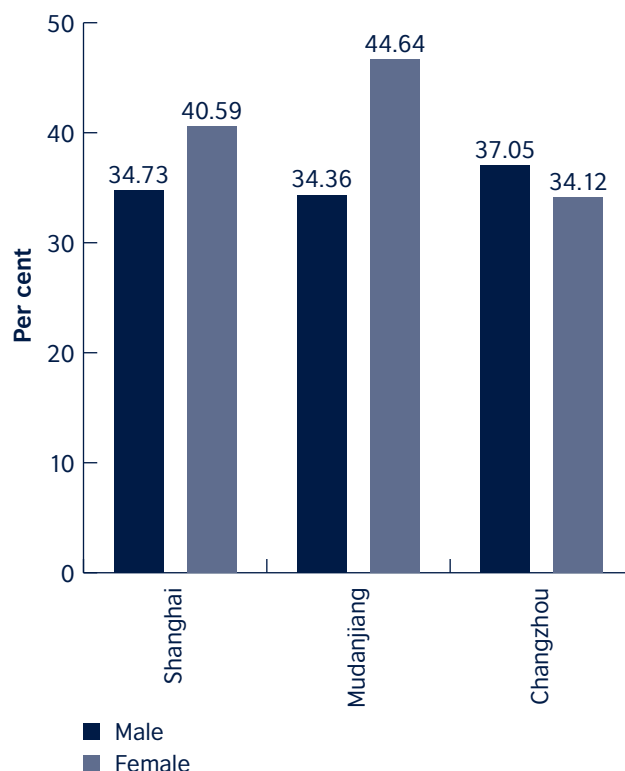
But this difference was not shown in the data collected from Shanghai or Changzhou (Shanghai Z=1.175, P=0.240; Changzhou Z=0.602, P=0.547). We wonder if this is related to the English learning Mudanjiang children have experienced. However, further research is needed to find out the reasons for this difference.

Table 27: Children's attitudes to learning between different cities

City	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Shanghai	74	2.61	0.33	1.64	3.00	33.92(2)**	0.000
Mudanjiang	80	2.23	0.43	1.14	2.86		
Changzhou	71	2.41	0.44	1.29	3.00		

** Extremely significant difference (P<0.001)

Table 28: Children's attitudes to learning English between different locations

Areas	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Urban	117	2.42	0.46	1.14	3.00	1.07(1)	0.302
Rural	108	2.40	0.40	1.29	3.00		

Table 29: Children's attitudes to learning English by gender

Gender of children	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	X²(df)	P
Male	112	2.38	0.44	1.14	3.00	1.50(1)	0.221
Female	113	2.44	0.42	1.29	3.00		

5.5.2. Similarities and differences of ELL attitudes in urban/rural and inland/peripheral locations by metaphor data

In section 5.3 metaphor data analysis has been grouped according to children's themes of cognition, emotion and behaviour. This sub-section examines whether there are similarities and differences in these three themes between urban/rural and inland and peripheral cities through the analysis of metaphor data.

When metaphors classified to the theme of cognition (please see section 5.3 for explanations) were grouped together, it shows some statistical differences (P=0.000) in the production of numbers of this type of metaphor (see Figure 15). However, if three locations were examined further, there was no statistical difference between Shanghai and Mudanjiang (P=0.958>0.05), but there were differences between Shanghai and Changzhou (P=0.002<0.05) and Mudanjiang and Changzhou (P=0.004<0.05). These differences could be due to methods of data elicitation in Changzhou where they encouraged children to produce more metaphors, thus proportionally more cognitive metaphors were received; or children in Changzhou were able to offer more cognitive types of expressions to show their thinking for the question. This latter explanation needs further study in Changzhou and in comparison with other locations when they were all asked to produce the same number of metaphors.

Figure 15: Mean numbers of cognitive metaphors in three locations

Mean number of cognitive metaphors
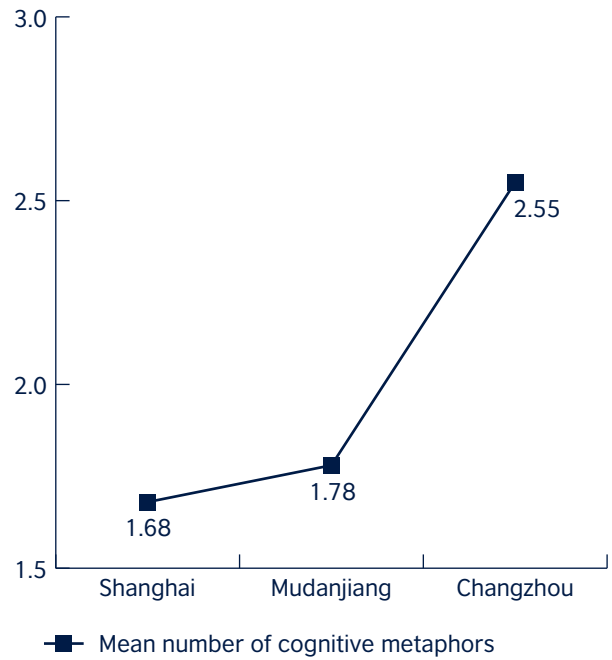
There are differences (see Figure 16) among three locations when the six sub-types of cognitive metaphors were analysed. In Shanghai, metaphors describing children's life knowledge and degrees of difficulty and easiness were produced more than other locations, while metaphor expressions related to sense and description were far more frequent in Mudanjiang, and in Changzhou children stood out for their metaphor expressions in the categories of shape and colour.

Figure 16: Differences of six sub-types in cognitive metaphors among three locations

- Shanghai
- Mudanjiang
- Changzhou
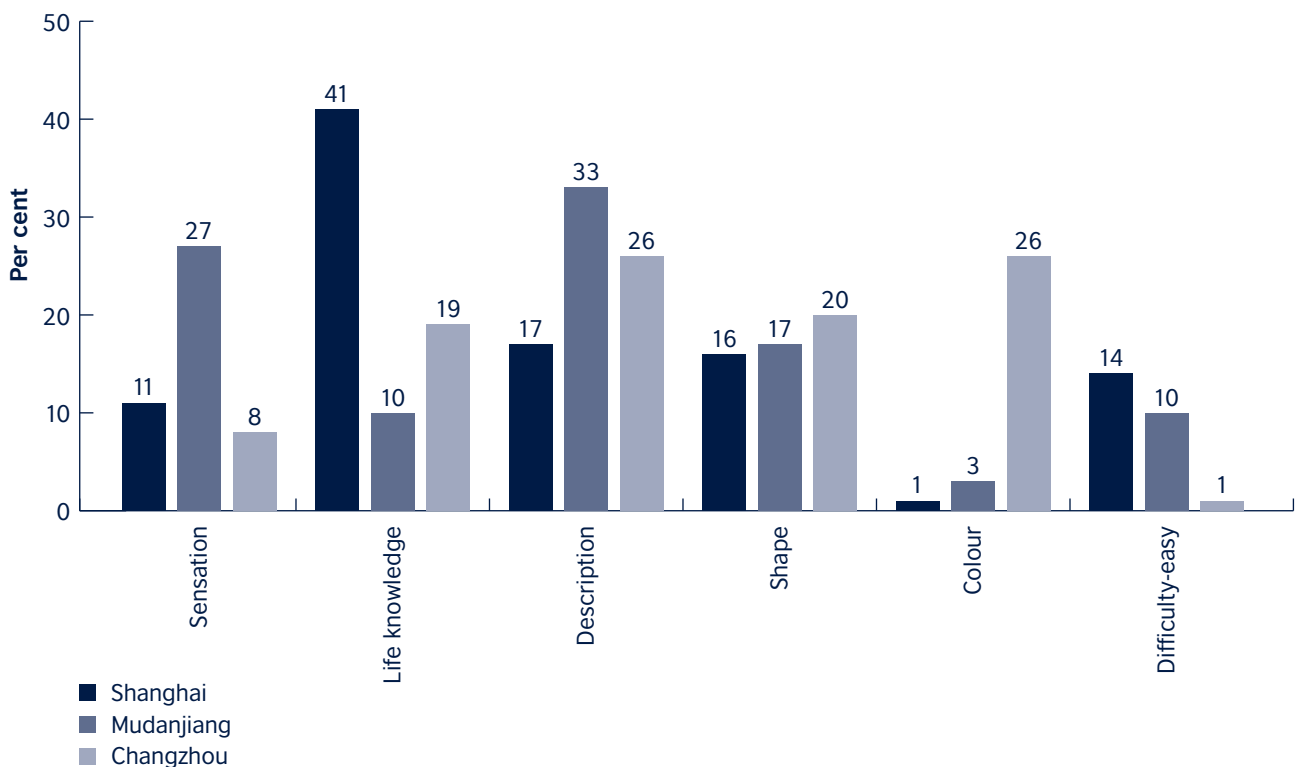
This might indicate some possible discrepancy in data elicitation methods used in each location or that children were more familiar with one type of expression than another. Further investigation is needed to tighten up the possible elicitation methods used across different areas of the study. However, this does not affect the overall findings.

The metaphors grouped into the emotional category also show the p-value with statistical significance (P=0.000) among the three locations (see Figure 17). Children in Mudanjiang gave more emotional types of metaphors than the other two locations. It is unknown if this was due to a reason that children in Mudanjiang were more relaxed or found it easier to express their emotions since people in this border city might have lower educational pressure than those in big and inland cities. Again, this result raises more questions for future research.

When further sub-types of emotional metaphors were looked into, there were no big differences for the sub-types of fear and loathing among the three locations. However, children in Shanghai expressed their happy feeling in metaphors more than other places, but children in Mudanjiang and Changzhou both revealed more love emotions in their metaphor expressions. We wonder if the teaching methods

were different in Shanghai where children might have more happy feelings in the process of learning English, while in other places the deeper and stronger emotion expressed by love were sensed by children for learning English.

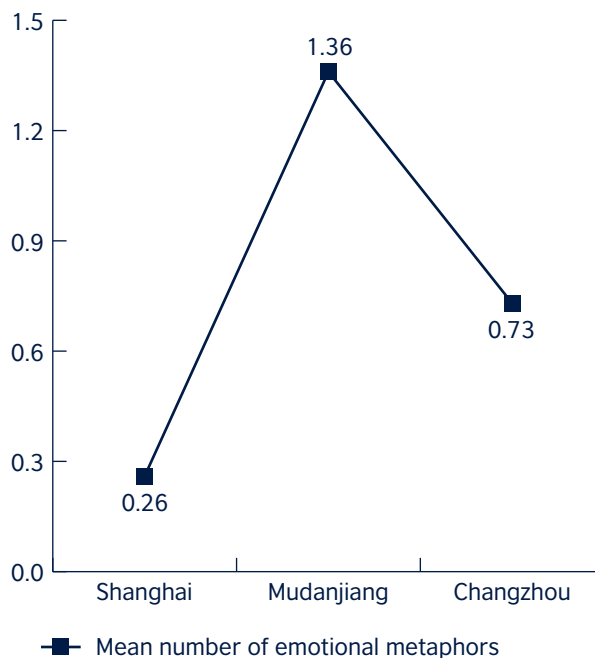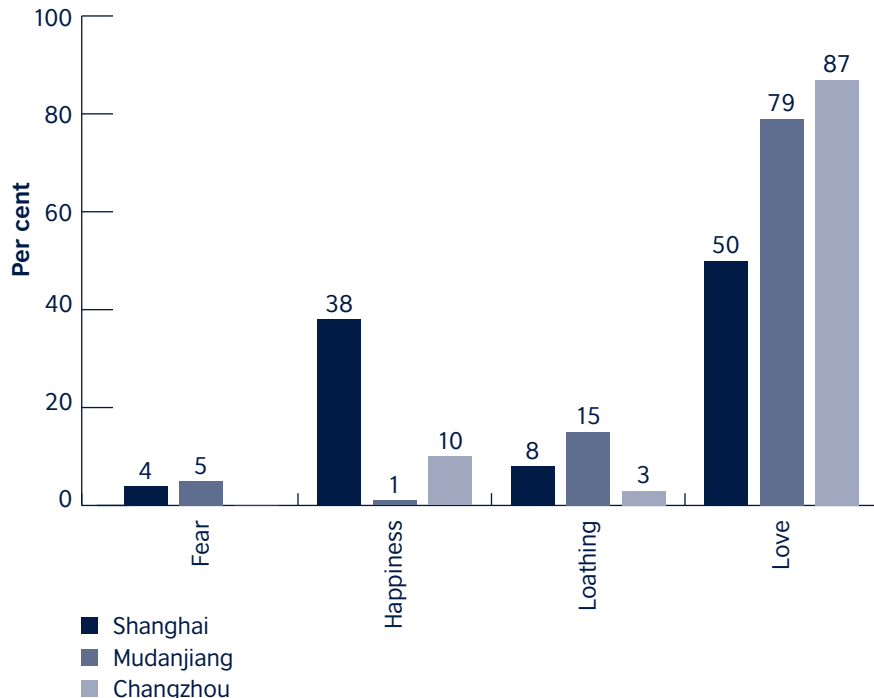**Figure 17:** Emotional metaphors by children in three locations

Figure 18: Sub-types of emotional metaphors by children in three locations

Since the metaphors classified into the theme of behaviour have a much lower number, the overall statistical comparison may be less meaningful, although it shows that Shanghai children had produced the highest number of behavioural metaphors (Shanghai N=25; Mudanjiang N=5; Changzhou N=15; P=0.000). It is harder to give a qualitative interpretation. The more detailed analysis (Figure 19) shows children in Shanghai expressed more metaphors about their desire for studying English and being active in learning, while in both Mudanjiang and Changzhou children gave more metaphors about learning being fun. This result might indicate that children in Shanghai have experienced more formal study or take learning English more seriously, but children in Mudanjiang and Changzhou experienced more fun in learning English activities.

Figure 19: Metaphors of behavioural aspect among children in three locations
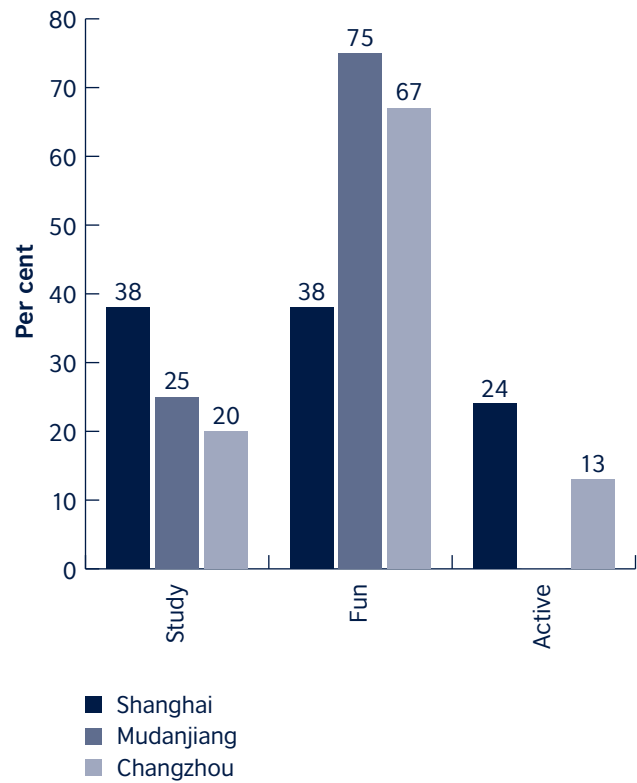
6

Conclusion

This study has investigated attitudes and perceived experiences of Chinese kindergarten English learners; parents' views on their kindergarten children learning English; the possible impact of parents' views on the attitudes of these children; and any similarities and differences in attitudes of kindergarten English learners between urban and rural areas as well as between inland and peripheral places. The research methods have used both qualitative (interviews containing metaphor and narrative analyses) and quantitative (questionnaires) approaches to explore this study. This area has not previously been covered in great detail by research publications.

The findings have shown a very complex picture in response to the questions raised in this study. With our analysis of questionnaire questions, elicited metaphors and narrative events, we have some understanding that Chinese English learners in this age group are, overall, active, engaging, enthusiastic, happy and positive towards learning English. However, metaphor and narrative data has shown that they are aware of the dynamic nature of language learning and experienced feelings of both happiness and loathing in regard to reciting and memorising English words.

The parents/carers are supportive, positive and willing to spend time and provide financial resources to support their children learning English. The impact of parents' views can be seen in their children's perceptions, and parents have an influential role in the learning of English at this age. However, when details were examined further, we can see similarities and differences in attitudes of participants between urban and rural areas and between more central cities and the border city. But some differences can be also seen between the big metropolitan city of Shanghai and smaller cities of Changzhou and Mudanjiang, as well as between the two smaller cities.

The more detailed analysis of the data has presented variations and preferences in attitudes and experiences regarding the participants' cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects in English learning even though overall responses from them are positive. Therefore, it would be too simplistic to say that attitudes and perceived experiences of learning English by these Chinese kindergarten children and parents are all like this or that. These underlying differences or preferences are in the detailed individual elements revealed in the data, e.g. there is no difference in parents' positive attitudes towards the learning of English no matter whether their child is a boy or girl, however, in Mudanjiang girls have higher positive attitudes to the learning of English than boys. On the other hand, the data also shows the importance and impact of parents' views on their children to learning English. This example may illustrate how complicated it can be to consider all factors and data to pin down the findings from the data and interpret underlying meanings of it.

The combination of questionnaire, elicited metaphor analysis and narrative exploration has certainly helped with the study of this topic. The data found from metaphors and narratives has given more depth and richness to complement questionnaire data. It demonstrates that it is possible to obtain metaphors and some narrative data from this age group of children in order to find insights into their own views and perceived experiences in learning when elicitation tools are carefully considered and designed.

This study has actually opened researchers' minds to raise more questions, because the current findings have revealed more questions and the need to understand the reasons behind the findings that we would like to understand more. The findings have also guided us to see where improvement can be made, e.g. in the design of ways to find out reasons for their answers, and the consideration of types of kindergartens in each area, so that tighter likeness could be matched for more accurate comparison. More time is needed to explore further the metaphor data in order to see the patterns and networks (Cortazzi et al., 2015; Jin and Cortazzi, in press), to explore conceptual frameworks in the minds of these children and parents and to see if cultures of learning (Jin and Cortazzi, 2012; Cortazzi and Jin, 2013) have played a role in the learning of English by Chinese kindergarten children. Further analysis of the narrative data will help with the improvement of language teaching (Zhou, 2009) in Chinese kindergartens in general and English language learning specifically, especially as the teaching of English to kindergarten learners is so commercialised and driven by the market, possibly with limited educational guidance and research.

The findings of this study have highlighted the need to investigate this topic further and in more detail, e.g. including teachers, assistants, administrators, company managers and those who are involved in the teaching of kindergarten children. Researchers and educators have a duty to provide the best learning environment to young children since the foundation of formal learning starts from kindergarten time.

7

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