

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT ON IMPROVING EFL CHILDREN'S
LISTENING PROFICIENCY

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THE IMPACT OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT ON IMPROVING EFL CHILDREN'S
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Abstract

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Hui Chen

Under the Supervision of Dr. Dong Isbister

Listening is an important skill that is not easy for foreign language learners to develop and craft. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between EFL (English as a foreign language) children's listening proficiency and parents' influence in creating an English-language environment at home via multimedia. This study employs a questionnaire completed by college students in a mandatory English course at a university in central China in 2016. The results show that listening to audio materials and watching visual materials at home have a significant impact on children's English listening proficiency, but parents' English proficiency, family income and residential areas show no clear correlation with children's listening proficiency. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also discussed in this paper.

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Chapter I: Introduction

With globalization and the country's growing international status, China's role in international affairs is increasingly important. This trajectory contributes to the ongoing popularity of the study of English among Chinese and has a great impact on Chinese parents' attitudes toward their children's study of English. They want their children to learn English, but not all of them guide them to do so effectively, often pushing their English language learning to schools or training institutions. However, children have limited time to study English at school or training institutions as EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, so parents can make a greater difference by taking advantage of extracurricular time to facilitate their children's English learning. Chinese children do not live in an authentic English-language environment and have few opportunities to experience one, so most have poor English listening and speaking proficiency. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) point out that listening takes up more daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication, and "numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor contributing to academic success" (p. 979). This points to the importance of listening comprehension. In addition, Funk and Funk (1989) note that listeners need guidance to learn from listening activities (p. 660).

A focus on creating an English-language environment can improve EFL learners' English proficiency, especially their listening ability. According to Ono and Sanders (2010), listening comprehension can be directly and positively influenced if family members effectively participate in children's English learning activities, such as by reading texts aloud or watching videos with children. This study aims to explore how parents can help improve children's

listening ability via multimedia so that a beneficial English environment can be built to help them learn English.

Statement of the Problem

Although quality-oriented education has been advocated in recent years, no great overall improvement has resulted; parents, teachers and even children themselves still consider examination to be the only valid way to assess children's study. Many Chinese parents' only requirement of their children is studying hard and having good performance in exams (Huang & Huang, 2009). They hold teachers and schools accountable for educating their children well, while their responsibility is to support their children's education financially. This situation needs to be changed, ideally by integrating English learning with school achievement. According to Winter (1966), good listening skills help improve children's school achievement overall. Therefore, in order to optimize families' influence on children's listening proficiency, parents can make full use of time at home to create an English-language environment and improve their children's listening proficiency.

Definition of Terms

1. Listening Strategy

There are two general types of listening strategies (Thompson & Rubin, 1996): metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. The former follows a procedure consisting of planning, defining goals, monitoring and evaluating. The latter, meanwhile, consists of predicting, listening to the known, listening for redundancies, listening to tone and resourcing (p.

335). The two strategies have different features and focuses, but they function equally for English learners at different levels.

2. Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach

The cognitive academic language learning approach is an instructional model based on cognitive learning theory that is designed to increase the achievement of both native students of English and those students who learn through the medium of a second language. It integrates content-area instruction with language development activities and explicit instruction in learning strategies (Chamot & O'Malley, 1996).

3. Multimedia Environments

Multimedia can be defined in terms of sensory modalities, such as visual vs. auditory; representational modes, such as pictorial vs. verbal; or delivery media, such as screens vs. speakers (Mayer & Moreno, 2002). For Lawless and Brown (1997), “multimedia environments are characterized by the ability to present information in a nonlinear or random access fashion” (p. 118). They provide learners with access to pertinent information and enable them to sequence the information in a meaningful manner.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to examine how parents' involvement can help improve children's listening proficiency and what implications the study have to further research in the relationship between EFL English language environment and English listening proficiency

Significance of the Study

This study attempts to explore the influence that parents exert on their children's listening comprehension in English and the possible methods parents can use to serve this aim. The findings will help parents create an English-language environment at home by using multimedia. This will be of importance to enhance children's listening proficiency most appropriately and effectively.

Methodology

For the primary research, a questionnaire will be designed to collect data about the impact of family involvement in improving EFL children's listening proficiency. The questionnaire will be conducted at Wuhan Polytechnic University, Wuhan, China. Approximately 50 junior students will be recruited to complete the questionnaire anonymously, and the findings will be analyzed quantitatively.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Presently, some studies focus on improving the ability of English listening comprehension and try to find out what factors affect English listening. The common conclusion is that insufficient exposure to the target language and a lack of interest are the major factors negatively affecting EFL (Learning English as a Foreign Language) students (Chen, 2012). Of course, it is not always possible to send the learners to English-speaking countries. Therefore, it would be better to find a way to create an English audio-visual atmosphere in the non-English speaking countries. Due to the limited time spent learning English at school, time that children spend at home should be utilized. Some studies conducted in China indicated that 70% of children's education came from families, 20% came from schools, and only 10% came from the society, which confirms the important position of family in children's development (Huang & Huang, 2009). Some researchers also underlined that family has been viewed as a primary context in which children develop skills that were crucial for later development (Frosch, Cox, & Goldman, 2001). Meanwhile, people have long believed that parents are the first teachers for their children. This literature review highlights the significance of listening for EFL children and discusses how EFL children's listening proficiency can be improved in the family environment.

For EFL learners, communicating with native English speakers fluently is the biggest dream, but in reality, most of them cannot understand native English speakers very well, even after studying English in school for several years. Many elements contribute to this fact, but the teaching methods and the learning focus may be primarily at fault. Funk and Funk (1989) pointed out that listening was neglected as a result of many factors, but the major factors possibly were that many teachers knew little about teaching listening, and some of them thought there was no need to teach it. More recently, many researchers realized the importance of

listening proficiency to the improvement of English ability and found several strategies to achieve the goal. This literature review considers EFL children improving their listening ability in the family background by responding to the following questions:

1. Why is listening vital in improving EFL learners' English proficiency?
2. What role do parents play in EFL children's English study?
3. How does multimedia function in EFL English listening comprehension?
4. What are the implications of studies to the relationship between EFL English language environment and English listening proficiency?

Why is listening vital in improving EFL learners' English proficiency?

Listening comprehension is crucial in English language acquisition, as one of the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Feyten (1991) conducted a survey among 90 college students and his findings suggested that listening ability emerged as an important component in the process of English language acquisition. In another study, Shao (2015) found that low levels of listening proficiency did not only have a negative effect on other language skills (speaking, reading and writing), especially spoken English, but also made learners feel anxious; additionally, it can harm learners' efficacy. Thus, learning some listening strategies could effectively improve learners' overall language proficiency.

Now that listening comprehension is closely associated with overall English learning performance, it is essential for EFL learners to understand how to listen and how to improve listening proficiency. "Listening is an active, complex process of constructing meaning by applying linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to the coming sounds" (Chang, 2012, p. 166). Studies confirming the usage of listening strategies demonstrated significant positive correlation with listening proficiency (Liu, 2009; Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Yu, 2003). Once listening

proficiency is improved, the other language skills (speaking, reading, and writing) will be enhanced.

What role do parents play in EFL children's English study?

Home is not only a shelter for children but an educational place for them. Parents at home can have a great effect on their children in many aspects. Homes with good environments provide opportunities for learning and exploration for the children (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Most after-school activities aim at improving children's cognitive and academic performance. Among the activities, family could directly and positively affect children's performance if family members participate in them actively (Ono & Sanders, 2010).

Parents' active and effective participation in children's learning activities at home can make a difference. Qiu and Xu (2015) conducted a study to examine the significance of family English learning environment and then found a new way to improve the quality and effect of learning English for EFL learners. Their findings strongly confirmed their hypothesis that parents could help EFL children's English learning at home once they shifted their traditional but biased concept of children's English study, which is that it is the schools' responsibility to educate children. The researchers stated that parents could become the participants and supervisors in their children's English study instead of onlookers and critics, which would greatly develop children's interest in English and would further improve their learning effects.

When it comes to the irreplaceable position of parents in their EFL children's English study, Yang (2007) and Pei (2013) conducted studies to discuss the likelihood of carrying out family English learning to help EFL children's English learning at home. Coincidentally, both researchers chose to conduct case studies with their own sons as the subjects. Yang (2007) stressed the

importance of listening comprehension and speaking ability under virtual environments created by audio and video materials, and the result was encouraging: his son performed better than his peers in English listening comprehension and other communicative abilities. Later, Pei (2013) found that parents' participation played a vital role in children's English learning at home when parents could fully organize the learning materials, learning time and learning styles. Among her findings, she highlighted the significance of high-quality audiovisual resources that could guarantee the accuracy of pronunciation and the improvement of communicative ability, and her son's performance could support it.

How does multimedia function in EFL English listening comprehension?

How to listen effectively remains a problem, especially for EFL learners. It is also a big barrier on the path of communicating fluently with native speakers. Most learners had a misunderstanding that they needed to "sit in the language lab quietly, listen to pre-recorded dialogues, and write the answers related to the oral stimulus" (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011, p. 977). Actually, many factors influence listening: the listening material, the goal of listening, the surroundings of the listening activity, the time of listening, etc. Funk and Funk (1989) thought learners should be given many different experiences of listening, which provided different purposes for listeners and would help them to develop abilities and interest.

With the advancement of technology, multimedia has found its way into every corner of people's lives, and researchers have begun to explore how multimedia can serve people to the utmost advantage. Kirkorian, Wartella and Anderson (2008) explored the relationships between electronic media, such as television, computers, videos and so on, and children's cognitive skills and academic achievement. In their research, they found multimedia could greatly improve

children's interest in learning, but at the same time, selecting the proper materials is also significant.

Other researchers have shown their interest in exposing learners to some kinds of technologies, such as television, radio, and internet programs, to strengthen and improve their listening skills and to further bridge the gap between different cultures. They all agreed selecting authentic materials from multimedia could greatly help learners in listening comprehension (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Kirkorian et al., 2008; Thompson & Rubin, 1996).

Meanwhile, some Chinese researchers conducted a series of studies to explore multimedia's influence on Chinese EFL learners' listening and speaking proficiency. They found that online multimedia-based listening and speaking class can remarkably improve EFL students' listening scores and speaking levels (Gao & Yu, 2008; Sun & Zhou, 2014; Zhang, 2008).

What are the implications of studies to the relationship between home language environment and EFL children's listening proficiency?

English is important for international communication and personal development at present. He and Zhang (2010) wrote that "modern technology has turned the world into a small village" and it has turned English into the "world language" (p. 769). This highlighted the historic position of English in modern times, but when learning English, EFL learners tend to put less emphasis on listening comprehension than on reading and writing; however, listening is used as a primary medium of learning at all stages of education (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Knowing the significance of listening is far from enough; understanding how to improve listening comprehension is key for EFL children. Many researchers showed intense interest in listening comprehension and found that input played a critical role in second/foreign language

acquisition (Feyten, 1991; Pei, 2013; Shao, 2015; Yang, 2007). The electronic communication revolution provided a large number of choices for EFL learners, and using the new technology made listening comprehension a more interactive, illustrative, and dynamic experience for native and second/foreign language learners (Dunkel, 1991). Meanwhile, Chen (2012) took a further step by indicating that multimedia, involving verbal or non-verbal parts, offered a more authentic language input for foreign/second language learners.

It is known that children cannot be educated as effectively only by teachers in classroom; parents should undertake their own responsibility at home. Based on the research mentioned above, establishing an English language environment at home is feasible and practical. What is more, improving listening proficiency is a demanding and lengthy course, especially considering the limited time of children's learning at school. Therefore, parents may take advantage of the time at home to facilitate children's English learning, particularly listening comprehension, by creating a beneficial environment at home.

In their studies, all researchers mentioned above realized English language environment mattered greatly to EFL learners, including children, but not many stressed the idea of "listening first" in the process. Children are strong in replication and have acute hearing, so immersion learning is the ideal method for EFL children's English learning, which can be conducted by parents at home (Hu, 2015; Ye, 2010). As for literature directly related to the current study, not much research has been conducted that explores parents' function in helping improve EFL children's listening proficiency via multimedia in order to create an all-English language environment at home. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to fill in the gap for providing some suggestion and implication.

Chapter III: Questionnaire Analysis and Recommendations

The Present Study

The present study was designed to address the following research questions: 1. Why is listening vital in improving EFL learners' English proficiency? 2. What role do parents play in EFL children's English study? 3. How does multimedia help improve EFL learners' English listening proficiency? 4. How does the present study help understand the relationship between EFL English language environment and English listening proficiency?

The study aimed to test the hypothesis that family involvement has great impacts on EFL children's English listening proficiency. It focused on how parents' involvement could help improve children's English listening proficiency. In particular, it examined the impacts of a multimedia English language learning environment at home.

3.1 Method

Participants

Participants in the present study were 42 college students at a university in central China. They were recruited from different departments in the School of Economics and Management (28) and the School of Mechanical Engineering (14). Even though the participants took English classes for approximately six years while they were in the middle school, they were EFL learners with low or intermediate level; none of them had any experience studying in an English-speaking country. All of them passed CET-4 (College English Test Band-4, a national college English as a foreign language test in China) during their sophomore year.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in the present study was a questionnaire that had a total of twelve questions. They were mainly about parents' involvement and its impact on the participants'

English listening proficiency during their primary school years. One of the twelve questions was open-ended, and the others were multiple choice questions (also closed-ended questions).

Data Collection

The present study was conducted in a mandatory college English class in March, 2016. The principal investigator -- also the course instructor -- invited the participants to complete a questionnaire during class time. Before doing the questionnaire, the participants read and signed the Consent Form. After collecting the signed Consent Forms, the principal investigator explained what the participants would need to do. It took them approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

In the present study, a total of 50 questionnaires were handed out to the participants. Five participants did not complete all the items and three participants wrote their names or student identification numbers on the questionnaires, so only 42 valid questionnaires were available for data analysis.

After the primitive data collection, the principal investigator used the SPSS software to process and analyze data in order to determine the correlation between participants' listening proficiency and their parents' involvement at home. After that, the principal investigator conducted a descriptive study of the open-ended question, hoping to explore the implications of the present study.

3.2 Result

The present study was designed to test the hypothesis that family involvement -- residential areas, family monthly income and parents' English proficiency -- more or less had impacts on children's English listening proficiency. There were five independent variables: residential areas,

family monthly income, and parents' English proficiency, watching English cartoons and movies, and listening to audio materials. The dependent variable was parents' involvement in activities to help improve children's English listening proficiency.

3.2.1 Result 1

According to the report of correlation analysis, three independent variables--residential areas, family monthly income and parents' English proficiency -- had no impact on children's English listening proficiency. However, watching English cartoons and movies, and listening to audio materials at home showed a positive correlation with children's English listening proficiency.

Table 1 showed the correlation between independent variables and the dependent variable. Some independent variables, such as residential areas ($r = 0.158$; $p = 0.317$), family monthly income ($r = 0.241$; $p = 0.186$), parents' English proficiency ($r = 0.234$; $p = 0.135$), had no significant correlation with the dependent variable--parents' influence on children's English proficiency. However, the other two independent variables--watching English cartoons or movies at home ($r = 0.531^{**}$; $p = 0.000$) and listening to audio materials at home ($r = 0.539^{**}$; $p = 0.000$)--had a significant impact on the dependent variable. The results showed that the previous hypothesis--residential areas, family monthly income and parents' English proficiency more or less influenced children's English proficiency--was incorrect. Put another way, if parents had awareness of participating in children's English listening activities, they would make efforts to create the best learning environment for their children, regardless of their own financial situations. On the contrary, if parents, who knew English well and had high income, had no interest in helping create an English language learning environment at home, they would not help with their children's study at all.

Table 1 Correlation analysis between Children’s listening Ability and Family English Language Environment

	Residential areas	Family monthly income	Parents’ English proficiency	Requested to watch English Cartoons and movies	Requested to listen to audio materials
Pearson Correlation (r)	0.158	0.241	0.234	0.531**	0.539**
Sig.(2-tailed) (p)	0.317	0.186	0.135	0.000	0.000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.2.2 Result 2

The regression analysis confirmed that a family English language environment parents created by using audio and visual materials had great impacts on children’s English listening proficiency. Nevertheless, audio and visual materials were only two of the factors that positively affected children’s English listening proficiency. This finding provided insights into future research in other factors that may help improve EFL children’s English listening proficiency.

In order to test the hypothesis that family involvement in creating an English language environment to help improve EFL children’s English listening proficiency, a regression analysis was conducted. Table 2 confirmed that the two factors were closely related. A significantly positive correlation existed between children’s English listening proficiency and a family language environment with audio and visual materials. However, this finding can only show that audio and visual materials were included in the factors that had positive impacts on children’s listening proficiency. Many other factors may also have had positive impacts on children’s English listening proficiency, but it was beyond the scope of the present study to explain all of them (the value of R Square is 0.291 and 0.275 respectively).

Table 2 The Regression Analysis between Family English Language Environment and Children's Listening Ability

Predictor	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Listening to audio materials	0.539	0.291	0.273	0.866
Watching Cartoons or movies	0.531	0.275	0.264	0.756

3.2.3 Result 3

Participants' expectations of their parents varied, but the majority of them confirmed the idea that parents' involvement could have active and positive impacts on their children's English learning. This finding further proved the importance of parents' involvement in children's English learning.

The participants were invited to answer one open-ended question: *If given opportunities, what do you wish your parents would do most at home to help improve your English proficiency?* Although they provided various answers, 85% stated that their English learning experience would have been different if they had learned English from their parents while they were in elementary school. They also expressed their appreciation of their parents who helped enhance their English learning experience through a variety of activities -- playing English tapes, cartoons or movies. All of these greatly boosted their interest in English and helped improve their English listening proficiency. Most of the participants reckoned that their parents' support was not solely about material inputs, but more about their willingness and appropriate methods. This result revealed that parents' positive attitude and involvement had positive impacts on children's

language learning experience.

3.3 Discussion and Limitations

The results confirmed that the family's multimedia environment positively correlated with children's English listening proficiency. They also confirmed that multimedia could greatly improve children's interest in learning, thereby leading to the development of their language skills (Kirkorian et al, 2008). In addition, the results revealed that there was a positive relationship between audio and visual materials and listening proficiency, compared with the traditional reading materials.

The study also had limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small, which surely affected the credibility and effectiveness of the results. In addition, in the questionnaire, the scale of multimedia was narrowed down to only English cartoons or movies and audio materials (English songs included). As a result, the study may have different findings if other forms of media were included in the study. Additionally, the questionnaire did not provide explicit explanations of the content of listening or visual materials, which could result in ambiguity and guessing among the participants.

Secondly, the study only used a questionnaire to test its hypothesis, and it was impossible to provide more detailed explanations of the effectiveness of listening to or watching the audio and visual materials. The open-ended question did not give a very clear direction about the range of the answer. For example, the principal investigator did not explain that the answer should focus on multimedia or parents' involvement on a single day or at a specific time for children's English listening activities. That was why participants gave various answers that were unrelated to multimedia or parental involvement in improving their English listening proficiency. Some said they wished they had been sent to English speaking countries if only their parents could make

more money. Others hoped their parents could study English together with them. Still others complained they were forced to study English although they didn't have any interest in English. These answers obviously had nothing to do with the present study.

3.4 Suggestions for future research

This study has specifically answered some questions, such as parents' involvement in helping improve their children's English listening proficiency, and multimedia's function in creating a family English language environment. It has also raised some other questions that are worthy of further research.

Firstly, questionnaires with multiple choices would provide the participants with an opportunity for guessing, which might lead to the inaccuracy of the findings. Therefore, more detailed and specific questions need to be designed in future research. For example, some participants might have responded to Question 7 arbitrarily -- *How many hours did you spend watching English cartoons in one day when you were in elementary school or kindergarten?* Their response was "never" to Question 6: *How frequent did your parents demand you to watch English cartoons at home when you were in elementary school or kindergarten?* This showed that they never watched English cartoons at home when they were in elementary school, so Question 7 was meaningless to them. Therefore, some additional instructions should have been provided: if your choice of Question 6 is "never", please skip Question 7 and leave it blank. In that case, the validity and dependability of the research would probably have been improved.

Secondly, the participants were college students, but the questionnaire aimed to study children's English learning experience in the elementary school. Some participants did not remember what happened. Then some of their responses might not be true. They may have simply followed the stream by copying others' answers. This unavoidably affected the validity of

the research results. Therefore, future research should carefully choose participants.

Finally, the target language of interest was English in the present study and the participants were Chinese college students. Future research could examine if the results still hold true for Chinese language learners who study foreign languages in other countries.

3.5 Conclusion

The present study concluded that parents' involvement had positive impacts on EFL children's listening proficiency if they created an English learning environment at home by providing multimedia learning materials and designing learning activities accordingly. With the increase of multimedia-based instructional software programs and electronic teaching products, more parents will be able to create an English language environment at home. In addition, there is an increase in the awareness of parents' involvement in children's learning activities. The findings in this study will provide insights into some specific implementation measures that parents can utilize at home to teach and help their children improve English listening proficiency.

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Appendix

Questionnaire of parents' influence on their children's English listening proficiency

The questionnaire is designed to help the investigator understand the influence of Chinese parents on their children's English study, and the effectiveness of using multimedia to help improve children's listening proficiency at home. Would you please spare approximately 30 minutes to answer 12 questions in this questionnaire carefully and honestly? Your answers will be kept strictly confidential, and all the data collected will be used in my seminar paper. They may be used for publication consideration or teaching purpose in the near future. Please do not write your name anywhere in the questionnaire. You also have the right not to participate or skip some questions you choose not to answer.

Thank you very much for your support and cooperation!

1. Your personal information:

Sex:

A. Male

B. Female

C. N/A

Age: _____

Major: _____

2. Where are you from?

A. Big city

B. Small-to-medium sized city

C. Town

D. Rural area

E. Choose not to answer

3. What is your family's monthly income?

A. Less than 2,000 yuan

B. 2,000 yuan

C. 3,000 yuan

D. 4,000 yuan

E. 5,000 yuan

F. More than 5,000 yuan

4. What is your parents' educational background?

A. Master or above

B. Bachelor

- C. Associate degree
 - D. High school
 - E. Others
5. What is your parents' level of English proficiency?
- A. Higher level
 - B. Intermediate level
 - C. Low level
 - E. My parents have no knowledge of English
6. How frequent did your parents demand you to watch English cartoons at home when you were in elementary school or kindergarten?
- A. Often
 - B. Sometimes
 - C. Seldom
 - D. Never
7. How many hours did you spend watching English cartoons in one day when you were in elementary school or kindergarten?
- A. Less than 1 hour
 - B. 1 hour
 - C. 2 hours
 - D. 3 hours
 - E. More than 3 hours
8. How frequent did your parents demand you to listen to English audio materials (including English songs) at home when you were in elementary school or kindergarten?
- A. Often
 - B. Sometimes
 - C. Seldom
 - D. Never
9. How many hours did you spend listening to English audio materials (including English songs) in one day when you were in elementary school or earlier?
- A. Less than 1 hour
 - B. 1 hour
 - C. 2 hours
 - D. 3 hours
 - E. More than 3 hours

10. How would you rank your parents' positive influence on your English study?
- A. A lot
 - B. Some
 - C. Only a little
 - D. Not at all
11. How much influence do you think parents can exert on children's English study based on your own experience?
- A. A lot
 - B. Some
 - C. Only a little
 - D. Not at all
12. If given opportunities, what do you wish your parents would do most at home to help improve your English proficiency?

Thank you again for your participation and cooperation!