

An Overview of English Language Education at Primary Level in Taiwan

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Abstract

English is the major foreign language taught at schools in Taiwan (Crawford, 2003; Su, 2000). It is also the most commonly studied foreign language and the language used for wider communication in business and scholarly exchange. It had been traditionally taught beginning at Year 7 until 2001 when the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum was implemented and English was introduced to the Grade 5 curriculum (Chang, 2007; Chern, 2002). English was later lowered to Grade 3 curriculum in 2005. To accommodate this change, many policies were stipulated and implemented in the first decade of the 21st century. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview and discuss some pertinent issues of English language teaching (ELT) in elementary schools in Taiwan.

Index terms: English curriculum, English education, primary school English, ELT in Taiwan

1. Background of primary ELT in Taiwan

Prior to the official introduction of English to the elementary school curriculum, many experimental projects were conducted to explore the feasibility and impact of teaching English in elementary schools. For example, in Kaohsiung, the metropolitan city in the southern part of Taiwan, English instruction had been offered as an extra-curricular activity at public elementary schools since 1991, and in 1997 English was officially implemented in the curriculum for fifth graders (Dai, 1998; Yeh and Shih, 2000). Taipei City also went through several stages of policy development to finalize English instruction at elementary schools (Huang, 1999). In 1997, the Taipei Bureau of Education implemented a four-year experimental English program in 19 schools, with another 85 schools incorporating English into their extra-curricular activities (Huang, 1999; Wang, 1998). By March 1998, more than 93% of public elementary schools in Taipei had added English to their curriculum and allotted one to two hours each week for English instructional activities (Dai, 1998). In 1999, an advisory team was formed by the Taipei Bureau of Education to evaluate the results of this experimentation. The major problems found included the divergence of teaching materials, the disparity in students' proficiency levels, the scarcity of multi-media resources adoption in class (Huang, 1999), and the lack of qualified English teachers. Some of these problems still exist to date (Chang, 2007). Nevertheless, based on the overall positive results of these experimental projects, the Ministry of Education started to plan a nation-wide implementation of English at elementary schools.

To address the issue of shortage of English teachers when English instruction is implemented in elementary

schools, a nation-wide teacher preparation program was adopted in July 1999 to train additional teachers for the new English curriculum. As a result, 3,536 out of the 45,495 people who applied from different walks of life were admitted to the training program and 1,922 completed the program to become certified elementary school English teachers. However, less than 1,500 of them are currently teaching at elementary schools (Chang, 2007).

2. Primary ELT curriculum

In September 2001, The Nine-year Integrated Curriculum for Elementary and Junior High Schools became effective. In this new curriculum, English is listed together with Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, and other local dialects in one subject called "Language Arts." Major changes relevant to ELT in the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum include: (1) adopting one set of curriculum guidelines and an open market for textbooks, (2) providing multiple channels for teachers to become certified, (3) advocating the Communicative Approach in English instruction, and (4) replacing the annual achievement-based senior high school entrance exam with the Basic English Competency Test, which is administered twice a year. According to the Ministry of Education (1998), English instruction is introduced to elementary school curriculum to (1) instill an international perspective into students; (2) best utilize students' "critical period" in language learning; (3) optimize the timing of the implementation of the new curriculum; and (4) follow the trends of the new era and fulfill parents' expectations. The rationale for implementing English at the primary level was, in a way, the result of a bottom-up decision-making process, i.e., a grass-roots movement (Yeh and Shih, 2000).

As specified in the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum guidelines, the goals of English curriculum are (1) to help students develop basic communication skills in English; (2) to cultivate students' interests in learning English; (3) to promote students' awareness of local and foreign cultures and customs (Ministry of Education, 2000). To achieve these goals, Communicative language teaching approach is adopted as the main instructional methodology. Also, instead of teaching a set of symbols for sound, i.e., the phonetic symbols, phonics is introduced to help pupils learn English words. Besides, a range of topics and genres for reading is recommended, so is the use of multimedia and multiple assessments. These guidelines acknowledge the unique nature of language learning for young learners and point to a direction that departs from the tradition of a structure-based language teaching approach for teenagers. The pedagogical emphases of English instruction at the elementary stage are placed on developing students' listening and speaking abilities in the first two years (i.e., 3rd and 4th grades) with gradual integration of reading and writing in the 5th and 6th grades. Creating a natural and

meaningful English learning environment is an important goal set in the curriculum.

3. Challenges of primary ELT in Taiwan

The problems that emerged after the official implementation of English instruction in the elementary schools are not unfamiliar to many. For example, although the Ministry of Education mandated the addition of English to the third-grade curriculum, local education bureaus have in a number of cases designated a different starting grade-level and allotted different hours for English instruction. According to Chang (2007), a 2006 nationwide survey showed that only 60.7% of public elementary schools followed the officially mandated starting year, i.e., Grade 3, with 31.8% of schools beginning English instruction at Grade 1 and 7.3% of the schools starting at Grade 2. This difference in the inception of English instruction means differences in curriculum structure, which has raised equity issues in education as well as concerns when students transferred from one city to another.

Another problem that has arisen with the implementation of the new curriculum is the issue of supply and demand for English teachers. It was estimated that 3,500 English teachers were needed when English instruction was implemented to 5th grade curriculum. However, only less than 2,000 were certified in the tailor-made teacher preparation program initiated in 1999. When the national policy mandated the inclusion of English in the 3rd grade curriculum, the problem became more serious. Chang's (2007) survey conducted in 2006 showed that only 51.7% of the teachers teaching English in public schools were qualified English teachers. Many homeroom teachers had to take crash courses to teach English to their students. The situation has not changed for better with the declining birthrate in Taiwan, which has led to an overall lower demand for teachers in elementary schools. With the shrinking number of available teaching positions in elementary schools, it is not likely for any new university graduate with a TEFL background to find a teaching post in elementary schools although there are obvious needs for more English teachers. In other words, the shortage of qualified and enthusiastic English teachers is a problem facing ELT in elementary schools nowadays.

Discrepancies in English educational resources also exacerbated the "Matthew Effect" in education. As the textbooks have been turned into a competitive and open market, many resources are now provided and distributed through publishers rather than the local education bureaus. With most publishers located in the big cities and interested in serving large urban schools, smaller schools in rural areas have slimmer chances to acquire adequate educational resources. Another problem related to resources is the booming industries of bilingual kindergartens and private language institutes (known as "cram schools") in Taiwan. These private language programs have attracted children from the more well-to-do families and created further gaps between the English proficiencies of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Differences in student's English proficiency have created problems for teachers. Though class size has been reduced to around 30 students per class due to lower birthrate, it is still difficult for teachers to design lessons to

cater to students with different proficiency levels and readiness to learn English. Many teachers resorted to the traditional teacher-fronted lecture to give grammar lesson and practice mechanical drills, oblivious to the spirit of communicative approach. On the other hand, there were teachers who believed in games and activities and created a competitive atmosphere and a noisy learning environment but simply forgot that it was English, rather than games themselves, that should be the focus of instruction. Su's study (2006), in which elementary school teachers were interviewed and their classrooms observed, found that Grades 1 to 3 teachers emphasized listening and speaking and employed more communicative activities with minimal skill-oriented activities; whereas teachers in Grades 4 to 6 tended to see the need for traditional skill-oriented activities, like drill practice and literal translation. Teachers in Su's study also found that limited teaching hours and large class size impeded their teaching efficacy.

Another issue on educational resources is the availability of technology support. In general, school teachers in Taiwan are familiar with IT and its adaptation in education. Technology-integrated English instruction has been advocated at all school levels, and many workshops have been conducted to familiarize elementary school teachers with the use of technology in class. Most elementary schools have their own computer rooms, and classrooms are usually equipped with LCD projectors and computers. Also, Interactive Whiteboards are not foreign to elementary school teachers as every school has at least one. However, most teachers still rely on traditional teaching aids like flash cards and posters, or Power Point files provided by textbook publishers as teaching aids. Teachers as a whole hesitate about adopting high-tech resources and resort to an approach that is most familiar to them in teaching. Besides, though a variety of English-learning software has been made commercially available, it tends to focus on mechanical drills and tests or games that stress memorization. Thus, there is a need for more computer-mediated learning programs designed based on the ideas of communicative approach, the one advocated in the curriculum guidelines, and involve meaningful use of the English language. Programs that focus on practicing pronunciation and intonation, such as MyET, should also be developed to cater to the needs of young EFL learners.

Assessment and its wash-back effects have always been an important issue for teachers. Multiple approaches to assessment are stipulated in Taiwan's nation-wide English curriculum; however, many teachers still rely heavily on pencil and paper tests for their in-class as well school-wide examinations. Besides, standardized tests that focus on vocabulary, reading, and grammar knowledge are very common, especially those that are of high stakes. However, though a balanced 4-skill instruction is advocated in the curriculum for upper grade levels, listening sections have not been included in any school-entrance exams so far. The concerns mainly come from the fear of technical failure and interference from environmental noise. A nation-wide but not high-stakes exam, called the Taiwan Assessment of Student Achievement (TASA), was introduced in 2004 to establish a database of student achievement in primary and secondary schools. The primary goal of conducting this assessment is to understand students' listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills in English and the factors that influence the learning achievement of students in the

fourth and sixth grades of elementary school (About TASA, 2010). The first speaking test in TASA was administered in 2009 to 6th graders, but due to technical problems, many answers recorded by students taking the test were incomprehensible. There obviously is room for improvement in technical support in ELT in Taiwan.

4. Alternatives and solutions

To address issues and problems that surfaced from the reform in education and the introduction of English in elementary school curriculum, a new teacher in-service training structure has been introduced. Various efforts to create an environment conducive to English learning have also been made.

4.1. Teacher support system

To familiarize teachers with the reform in education and provide primary and secondary school teachers with professional development opportunities, two different teacher support structures have been implemented from 2003 to 2005 (Chern and Hsu, 2009). In 2003, a group of seed teachers were recruited and trained regularly to help local school teachers refresh teaching ideas and share their best practices in the classroom. They were the teacher trainers nominated by local education bureaus and trained to be specialists to help local teachers; they took workshops to learn the latest teaching strategies and ideas; they also joined a Regional Instructional Consulting Team, which included school principals, master teachers, and university professors, to visit local schools, offer workshops, and share teaching ideas. Appointed from 2003 to 2006, seed teachers' mission was to visit all schools in their region and report back to the MOE regularly. This was the first system introduced to ensure all English teachers become familiar with the latest teaching methods specified in the curriculum.

From 2005, a three-tier structure of teacher trainers was implemented, the first tier being the overseeing planning group at the central government level called *MOE Curriculum and Instruction Consulting Team* or *Central Advisory Team (CAT)*. The team's jobs are to disseminate and implement government policies and organize training workshops for local consulting teams, which form the second tier called *Regional Instructional Consulting Team*. The main mission of these local consulting teams is to visit schools in their districts and provide pedagogical advice and assistance. The third tier is at school level and includes mentor teachers from local schools. Figure 1, adopted from Chern and Hsu (2009), shows the structure of this support system.



Figure 1. The three-tier teacher support system

In this support system, there are two phases of training courses to prepare teacher trainers. In the first

phase, beginning training courses are offered yearly to newly recruited Regional Instructional Consulting Team members. The courses include topics on policies like new curriculum guidelines, ability benchmark, and Basic English Competency tests as well as those focusing on consolidating teachers' ELT professional background. The courses in the second phase are more advanced and are designed for Regional Instructional Consulting Team members who have returned in the second year to further prepare them to become trainers. Phase 2 courses focus on the "why" and "how" of putting policies into practice, networking between central and local governments, as well as linking theories and practices in ELT.

The Regional Instructional Consulting Team members organize professional development activities for teachers in their regions. They prioritize which projects to be implemented or workshop topics to be organized based on the teaching contexts unique to the locality of the schools. Across the years, popular workshop topics include *phonics instruction*, *readers' theater*, and *innovative assessments*.

4.2. Enrichment of learning environments

Bringing more resources to underprivileged areas to enrich students' learning experience has been on the agenda of various in-service workshops and ELT meetings in Taiwan. Recruiting native speakers of English and setting up situational English classrooms are ways to create conducive English learning environments for schools that are less resourceful.

Over 100 native speakers of English, all certified teachers in their own countries, were recruited to co-teach with local English teachers. A survey conducted in seven counties which have had foreign English teachers in their programs showed that in general, there were positive effects on students' motivation in learning English (Chang, Chern, Lo, 2008). There were, however, logistics problems like recruitment, contract, and evaluation as well as pedagogical concerns like how to ensure co-teaching is efficiently and effectively executed.

Besides bringing native English speaking teachers, another way to facilitate English learning is to create a friendly atmosphere and simulated settings for learning English in different contexts. As a result, in 2007, 37 English situational classrooms (e.g., those with simulated shopping centers, restaurants, clinics, etc.) were established in Taoyuan County to create rich English learning environments for students in that county. The courses offered in these classrooms are either communication-based or provide hands-on activities to engage learners and immerse them in an English environment with native English speaking teachers. Today, 11 cities/counties have adopted these concepts to create an environment conducive to learning, dubbed English Villages. The duration of each program in an English village varies from half-a-day to one week, and the size of the "village" ranges from one classroom to one whole building complex. Spare rooms in schools which have shrinking student enrollment, mostly in remote areas, have been turned into situational classrooms so that students in areas with fewer resources also have an opportunity to be immersed in English and practice using it for communication.

Besides English villages that offer camp-like activities, Taipei County started an experimental project in

2008 called “Activating English,” in which three additional activity-based English classes per week can be added to the curriculum if schools apply for funding to bring in more English teachers to teach the additional hours. Though some distinct results have been documented and the local government plans to implement the program county-wide in 2010, this increase in the time allotted for English instruction has raised some controversial issues. For instance, adding extra teaching hours violates the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines, which set specific teaching hours for each subject from Grades 1 to 9.

5. Conclusion

In this era of globalization, English is no doubt a “lingua franca,” the key to living in the global village. Adding English to primary school curriculum has become a trend among EFL countries in Asia. Problems and controversies at the initial stage are unavoidable, but what is of significance is the provision of solutions to address problems that have emerged and the implementation of changes to reflect the needs of the society.

English has been introduced to elementary school curriculum in Taiwan since September 2001. In its almost one decade of practice, ELT in Taiwan has not only gone through turmoil but also seen light at the end of the tunnel. With the growing interest in and attention paid to English education in Taiwan, there will certainly be more innovative policies and practices in the years ahead. There is much that EFL countries in Asia can share and learn from each other.

6. References

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