



Teaching English in Elementary Schools in Taiwan : Its Problems and the Government's Countermeasures

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Teaching English in Elementary Schools in Taiwan: Its Problems and the Government's Countermeasures

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I. Introduction

With the advancement in information technology and the convenience of transportation, the opportunities for communication between people have increased, and with the frequent international political, economic and cultural exchanges, the role of English, the so-called international language, has become more and more important. Linguist Crystal (1997) estimates that by the end of the 20th century, approximately 1.2 to 1.5 billion of the world's population will speak English fluently. This globalization of English has had a profound impact on language education policies in many countries around the world, especially in Asia and in countries where English is a foreign language. How to improve people's English proficiency and strengthen their country's competitiveness in the international arena has become one of the key issues for governments in education and governance. Taiwan is no exception. In order to meet the needs of the international community in line with the direction of the country's development, there is an urgent need to improve the country's English language skills, and the implementation of early English education in elementary schools is irresistible.

In response to the growing interest in English education, the Ministry of Education (MOE) officially announced the inclusion of English as a compulsory subject for grades 5 and 6 in 2001, and decided to extend it down to grade 3 in 2005. This epochal change has ushered in a new era for English education in Taiwan. However, the implementation of the new policy had many impacts, including financial problems, English planning, teacher qualifications, and equipment in each county and city, and other related factors that caused differences in the teaching field and affected the implementation of English education policy and the promotion of English language teaching. In 2005, I published a paper in *Language and Culture* exploring the implementation of English language teaching in Taiwan's elementary schools and the problems faced in its implementation. The focus of the present paper is to examine the effectiveness of the government's

countermeasures to the implementation of English language instruction in elementary schools by citing relevant data. This paper consists of 4 sections. Section 1 outlines the history of the implementation of English language teaching in Taiwan's elementary schools. Section 2 summarizes the current status of implementation in each county and city with reference to literature reviews. Section 3 analyzes the problems faced in the implementation of English language teaching in elementary schools and discusses the countermeasures proposed by the MOE in response to these problems. Lastly, in section 4, some suggestions for future English language policy implementation are proposed.

II. The development of the English language teaching in elementary schools

In order to enhance the country's competitiveness and to cultivate talents who can meet international standards, Taiwanese government decided to reform Nine-year Curriculum for English education and moved English education to start in elementary schools in 1993. According to a survey conducted by the MOE in 1997, of the approximately 1,055 national elementary schools in Taiwan from 1993 to 1997, 230 schools offered English language classes and 825 schools did not, representing approximately 21% of the total number of schools with English language classes. The most common reasons for not offering English classes are the lack of qualified teachers and the difficulty of selecting English materials (Inagaki, 2005). For English language instruction to take root in elementary schools, the MOE released the Nine-year Joint Curriculum in 2001, which specified that English would be taught throughout the country starting from the fifth grade of elementary school. However, due to the varying pace of implementation by county and city, the MOE officially announced that beginning in 2005, English instruction would begin in the third grade, with two English classes per week for three to six class periods (MOE, 2003).

III. English language education practices in elementary schools

The dilemma of teaching English in elementary schools varies from school to school, and from urban to rural areas. The situation of implementation is as follows.

1. At what grade level and instructional time/frequency

After the implementation of English language teaching in elementary schools in 1993, Taipei City, which has the most resources for teaching, was the first to implement the program, with the upper grades being the most popular (Tsao,

1993). Chai (1999) surveyed elementary schools in Taichung City, Taichung County, Changhua County, and Nantou County, and found that nearly three-fifths of the schools had implemented English language instruction, with Taichung City having the highest percentage and Nantou County the lowest. The majority of classes were held in one session per week, followed by two sessions per week, and most classes were held during group activities. The largest class size was 25-35 students. According to a survey conducted by the National Teachers Association in 2003, over 80% of schools in ten counties, including Taipei City, Yilan County, and Hsinchu City, began teaching English in the first grade. Miaoli and Pingtung counties were the slowest to start English education, with nearly half starting in the fifth grade. In terms of instructional time, the highest percentage of upper grades have two periods, while the number of English instructional hours for first through fourth grades varies by county. The majority of counties and cities have one period per week for grades 5 and below. In Taipei City, Yilan County, Taichung County, Tainan City, Kaohsiung County, and Hualien County, there are two periods per week, and about 70% of schools in Tainan County have three periods per week.

From the above reports, it can be summarized that English instruction in urban elementary schools extends down to the first grade, while in rural elementary schools it is more common in the third or fifth grade. The number of hours of instruction is also higher in urban than in rural areas, with most urban elementary schools having two classes per week and most rural elementary schools having one class per week.

2. Teaching materials

Since the implementation of nine-year compulsory education in Taiwan in 1968, there have been three main types of textbooks used in schools: national-edition textbook, textbooks edited by private publishers and approved by the MOE, and teacher-authored materials. When the MOE set up the English curriculum for elementary schools, there were no standardized textbooks, so the main sources were textbooks edited by private publishers and self-developed textbooks. English textbooks for elementary schools include both audio and print materials. According to Liao (1999), 36 schools used commercially available textbooks, while only 4 schools used teacher-authored textbooks. Huang (2002) investigated seven southern counties and found that the sources of English teaching materials in elementary schools were: commercially available materials approved by the MOE (78.6%), self-developed materials (15.2%), and teacher-authored materials (6.2%). According to Yang (2004), about 95% of the schools in Taipei City that

implemented English language teaching in grades 3-6 used commercially available textbooks. Chen (2007) reported the majority of schools in Taipei City use self-developed materials for each school, followed by textbooks published by private publishers. In Taichung City, MOE-approved textbooks and textbooks approved by Taichung City predominate, followed by self-developed materials for each school or teacher-authored materials.

3. Teaching methods and assessments

In the 2001 Nine-year Joint Curriculum, the MOE set out several directions and principles that must be followed when editing textbooks. The principles are that the content should be practical, easy to understand, and lively and interesting. The teaching method should focus on developing listening and speaking skills, supplemented by reading and writing. The guideline has had a great impact on teachers' teaching methods. Teachers actively use a variety of print and audio materials, such as audio tapes, video tapes, computer multimedia, books, and pictures, to train students' listening and speaking skills. In terms of teaching methods, Hsieh (2001) surveyed the implementation in Taoyuan County and found that the majority of English teachers in Taoyuan County included conversation, games, English songs, pronunciation practice, and sentence practice in their lessons, but the language used mostly is in Mandarin. The survey conducted by the National Teachers Association in 2003 found that 96.6% of English teachers used a mix of English and Mandarin instruction, and 3.4% of teachers taught entirely in English. Of the four categories of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, over 90% focused on listening (96.8%) and speaking (93.6%), while only 4.8% and 4.5% focused on reading and writing.

Next, in terms of assessment, Hsieh (2001) investigated the assessment methods of English teaching in Taoyuan County and found that most of the teachers used oral tests, listening tests, and games to assess their students. Lee (2003) investigated Taitung County and found that the assessment patterns included participation in classroom activities, oral performance in class, and performance on homework or assignments. Ho (2003) investigated the situation in Penghu County and reported that the most commonly used assessment methods were listening, oral, performance, and game assessment.

From the above surveys, it can be included that in order to achieve the goal of teaching English in elementary schools with listening and speaking as the main focus and reading and writing as a supplement, as stated in the Nine-year Joint Curriculum, most of the English teaching assessments in elementary schools are

based on multiple assessments.

4. Teacher's qualifications

Elementary schools have struggled with the problem of teacher shortage since the implementation. A 1999 survey conducted by Chai in Taichung City, the results showed that most of the teachers in the implementing schools were the original faculty, university graduates in general subjects; only about one-third of the teachers were from the teacher training courses or majored in English at universities. Chen (2000) surveyed 150 elementary schools in Taipei City and found that the sources of teacher qualifications were, subject faculties, private school teachers, and external teachers who have passed English certification exams. The results of the National Teachers Association survey showed that the employment of foreign teachers varied by county and city, with Hsinchu City being the most unusual, with over 90% of schools employing foreign teachers.

From these findings, it can be concluded that the sources of English teachers in elementary schools are quite diverse, ranging from subject faculties, private school teachers, external English teachers, or foreign teachers.

IV. Issues with early English education and government's countermeasures

Since the implementation of English language teaching in elementary school in 2001, it has been a new challenge for the government, the schools, and the English teachers on the front lines of education. In terms of institutional design, teacher qualifications, and teaching content and methods, there are not only differences between counties and cities, but also between schools. For example, in terms of teaching, most of the schools implemented grade levels mainly in the lower middle grades, but some counties and cities have extended their autonomy down to the first grade. There are also many students who have had experience learning English outside of school. In terms of materials, there is a wide variety of situations, with different versions used in each school, and different versions for different grade levels within the school. Teacher sources are also quite diverse. Another issue worth noting is the "urban-rural divide," where urban elementary schools have more teaching resources than their rural counterparts, a phenomenon that affects the quality and rights of students.

Another issue that should not be overlooked is the attitudes of teachers towards English language teaching. According to a survey conducted by Hsieh (2001), the majority of elementary school teachers in Taoyuan County agreed with the policy, but they found it difficult to teach. The main problems were: too many different

levels of students, too few classroom hours and practice opportunities, teachers' lack of ability, too few opportunities to participate in study tours, and insufficient teaching media. In a survey conducted by Hsieh (2002), 57 public elementary schools in Taichung City found that teachers were unable to implement English language teaching because of the varying levels of students, the large number of students, and the lack of teaching media. A survey conducted by the National Teachers Association also found that 78.9% of elementary school English teachers were concerned about the lack of articulation in English language education at the junior high school/elementary school level. In addition, 76.0% of teachers reported that an average of one-third of students in their classes had already learned English before receiving formal English classes, which could lead to a serious English gap among students. In terms of teacher shortages, as many as 62.2% of teachers had to take on subjects other than English, and 48.8% of teachers felt there was a significant shortage of qualified English teachers.

From the above findings, we can see that the problems of bridging English education, English proficiency gap and shortage of qualified English teachers have gradually surfaced. The results of the above survey can be summarized as follows: (1) different grade levels of English teaching in elementary schools in different counties and cities, (2) the bimodal phenomenon, (3) lack of qualified teachers, (4) insufficient teaching resources, and different English teaching materials. The following is a discussion of the policies and strategies proposed by the MOE to address these four problems.

1. Disparities between rural and urban area

The issue of different grade levels of English language instruction has received a lot of attention from the public. The MOE published a manual called "English Teaching Manual for Primary and Secondary Schools" in 2003, which states that schools must use appropriate teaching arrangements to allow students to achieve their curriculum goals. For some counties and municipalities that intend to extend English language instruction to the lower grades, the MOE specifically states that the four conditions of (1) legality, (2) procedure, (3) professionalism, and (4) reporting of experimental projects must be met in order to effectively ensure the quality of English language education in the lower grades (MOE, 2003). In addition, the language curriculum and resource allocation for Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English language teaching should be based on the principle that Mandarin and Taiwanese are the primary and English language teaching is the secondary.

In fact, there is much debate among experts and scholars as to which grade level English teaching should begin. Of course, the critical period of language learning should be taken into account, but whether the learning environment is appropriate and whether students are under too much pressure to learn must also be considered. Any language is closely related to culture, and if a foreign language is learned before a good foundation in the native language and culture has been laid, it will have an impact on the transmission and identification of the native language and culture. These issues need to be explored in depth.

2. Bimodal phenomenon

The bimodal distribution of students' English proficiency due to the urban-rural gap has also attracted a great deal of attention from the public. The "bimodal phenomenon" refers to the "gap" between urban and rural areas that creates a disparity in English proficiency among students. Because urban elementary schools have more teaching resources than rural elementary schools, the gap between urban and rural students' English proficiency has been created. To remedy this problem, the MOE has developed the following four policies and measures to address the urban-rural gap in English language education.

- (1) Encourage English teachers to serve in schools in remote areas and establish a system for qualified English teachers to serve in schools in those areas.
- (2) Encourage English teachers in indigenous areas to further their studies and enhance their professional knowledge in teaching.
- (3) Organize "Magic Speed English Summer Camp" to help outlying island and remote elementary schools by using satellite transmission and audio-visual.
- (4) Set up an English club to solve the problem of curriculum articulation and the gap between students' levels.

In recent years, the bimodal phenomenon has not only existed between counties and cities across the country, but also in the same county, school, and even in classrooms. For example, in the classroom, some students have been learning English since bilingual kindergarten, while others are new to the language. The gap in levels not only causes confusion for teachers, but also causes students with lower learning outcomes to lose self-confidence. Zhang (2006) discussed the factors that contributed to this phenomenon, including the urban-rural divide, the economic background and concern of the students' parents, the amount of learning resources, the quality of teachers, and the motivation of the students. Another

noteworthy issue is that the gap in English proficiency among elementary school students has been extended to the junior high school level, as evidenced by the results of the General English Proficiency Test. This learning gap is expected to be addressed through effective measures.

3. Lack of qualified teachers

The success or failure of English language teaching is highly dependent on the quality of the teachers. A good English teacher is defined as one who has a certain level of language ability and teaching expertise. Inagaki (2005) also explored that the greatest difficulty in implementing English language teaching in elementary school is the lack of teachers with English language teaching skills. There is also a lack of training in teachers' professional English language skills and English teaching methodology. The MOE is aware of the need to review and train English teachers in elementary schools. In 2003, a policy was enacted that defines the sources of future teachers as 1) teachers who have passed the MOE's certification test and completed training, 2) current teachers who are not certified by the MOE, 3) university students majoring in English education, 4) certified support teachers, and 5) foreign teachers.

One of the measures taken by the MOE to address the problem of English teachers in remote schools is to bring in foreign teachers to co-teach with native English teachers. However, the policy was controversial when it was proposed. According to a survey conducted by Wang et al. (2005), the MOE has been questioned and criticized for the lack of legal basis for introducing foreign teachers, disregarding the employment opportunities of local teachers, setting the worst example of "pandering to foreigners," paying relatively unreasonable salaries, and confusing students' perceptions of local culture. The MOE has responded to these criticisms with a number of measures.

- (1) To develop relevant measures and methods to strictly define the qualifications of foreign teachers.
- (2) In order not to allow foreign teachers to replace the current teachers in elementary schools, English teaching will continue to be led by the current teachers.
- (3) In response to the criticism that the introduction of foreign English teachers is "pandering to foreigners," the MOE points out that the introduction of foreign teachers has been a long-standing practice in neighboring Asian countries. For example, Japan began in 1978, Hong Kong in 1997, and Korea in 1995.

Bringing in foreign teachers may partially solve the problem of insufficient English teachers in remote areas, but a 2004 report by Zhang showed that the implementation of English language teaching in elementary school in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria has resulted in multiple teaching problems due to the lack of teaching expertise of foreign teachers. Zhang suggested that the policy of bringing in foreign teachers should be positioned as a “transitional measures,” and that the only way to address the problem is to actively cultivate qualified English teachers.

4. Insufficient teaching resources and inconsistent English teaching materials

Peng (1995) pointed out that the most serious difficulty in implementing English language teaching in elementary schools is the teacher qualification, followed by the lack of teaching resources, the irregularity of teaching materials, and the difficulty in selecting teaching materials. It was also discussed in Chai (1999) that teachers were troubled by the lack of hardware and software and the difficulty in determining the criteria for selecting teaching materials. The MOE has invested heavily in language specialist classrooms and audio-visual media in the hope that this will help English language teaching and learning to be effective. To solve the problem of inconsistent English textbooks, the MOE decided in 2003 to adopt a policy of “combining the Ministry’s textbooks with the private textbooks” in which having the advantage of full openness, able to balance the market and avoid the phenomenon of some booksellers monopolizing textbooks and interfering in teaching.

V. Conclusions

From the above-mentioned problems in the implementation of English language teaching in elementary school and the government’s countermeasures, it can be seen that there are still many problems that need to be solved. For example, the best grade level for English teaching, the differences in students’ English proficiency and the gap between urban and rural areas, the training of qualified teachers and the appointment of foreign teachers, the lack of teaching resources and the inconsistency of English teaching materials are all problems that need to be further explored. Based on the relevant literature, I summarize the opinions of experts and make the following suggestions from the viewpoints of the above issues in the hope that they will serve as a reference for the future implementation of English education policies.

- (a) In terms of the grade level of English implementation, most front-line English teachers recommend starting at third grade level. Children in first grade are only just learning their native language, and learning a foreign language too early before they have a good foundation in their native language will result in “losing sight of the other” and confusing and interfering with each other. As Zhang (2006) points out, foreign language learning must take place after the basic values of the mother tongue have been established, and foreign language learning must be diversified beyond just the international language (English). In order for English language instruction to be effective, it is best to begin in the third grade.
- (b) There are many ways to solve the problem of student differences in English proficiency and the urban-rural divide, but most English teachers believe that grouping students according to their level is the most effective way. To address the urban-rural divide, Wang et al. (2005) suggest that elementary schools can work with neighboring colleges and universities, and that students from the colleges and universities can spend their summer and winter vacations or after-school time in elementary schools as remedial English teachers or in English language camps. For the elementary schools, this can enrich and remediate the English teaching manpower; for the supporting university students, this can increase teaching experience and accumulate social service experience.
- (c) In addressing the shortage of English language teachers, many experts point out that the most important factor in planning English language instruction in elementary schools is the development of English language teachers. The best source of teachers is qualified elementary school teachers who have passed the English Language Teaching Competency Test. It is also suggested that accelerating the development of professional English teachers is the most effective way to solve this problem. Although the issue of bringing in foreign English teachers has been a subject of much debate, it is clear from the literature that most English teachers are in favor of the idea as long as the government does a good job of supporting it.
- (d) With regard to the lack of teaching resources and the inconsistency of English teaching materials, Wang et al. (2005) suggest the establishment of an English teaching resource center, as well as subsidizing schools to purchase audio-visual media materials and setting up English specialist classrooms. In addition to the MOE’s version, researchers suggest hiring experts and teachers to develop teaching materials that are appropriate for our students, and adjusting the structure of the curriculum so that there is a continuity of

teaching materials between the primary and secondary levels.

Teaching English in elementary school in Taiwan has been officially implemented for more than 20 years since 2001, and there are still many problems to be overcome at this stage. While exploring how to solve the problems and smoothly promote the implementation of English education in elementary schools, I believe that education policy makers should also reflect on the purpose of learning English. In the midst of globalization and internationalization, English has undoubtedly become the common language for communication across the globe. However, can learning English, an international language, lead to the internationalization of a country? The proposition itself is open to question. As the age of learning a second foreign language decreases, there is bound to be a crowding out of the learning of their own language and culture. For example, there are many proverbs in the language that require proficiency in the language to be understood, and whether learning a second language too early will affect the next generation's awareness of their original culture and the learning of deeper terms in their native language. These are questions that need to be considered.

In 2018, Taiwanese government announced a 2030 Bilingual National Policy. The overall goal of this massive policy is to create a bilingual education system in Taiwan by 2030 to help achieve Taiwan's globalization goals. However, there are currently obstacles to the implementation of this policy in Taiwan. There are great concerns about the extent to which English should be promoted in society and education, and how this will affect Taiwan's national and regional identity. According to a recent report by *The China Times News Network*, scholars point out that the bilingual policy is seriously lacking in planning. If the government is bent on having its own way and lack of prudent planning, it will lead to chaos such as the weakening of the mother tongue, confusion in identity, insufficient learning, and weakened creativity, which will eventually lead the country heading for a mediocre future.

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Abstract

Globalization is affecting English language learning around the world. Taiwan is no exception. The Taiwanese government believes that in order for a country to advance and to foster international competitiveness, its people must have a strong foundation in English. In 2001, the government decided to put English as a compulsory subject from the 5th grade of elementary school and extend it down to the 3rd grade in 2005. This epochal change marked the dawn of a new era in English education in Taiwan, but it also brought about major changes in the school education and society. This paper firstly examines the development of English language teaching in elementary schools in Taiwan, then elaborates on the implementation details and government's countermeasures to issues during implementing, and lastly proposes some suggestions for future English language policy implementation in Taiwan.