

Exploring Taiwanese Primary English Education: Teachers' Concerns and Students' Perceptions

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Taiwan officially started elementary school English education from Grade 5 in 2001 and from Grade 3 in 2005, and it is known as one of the countries neighboring Japan that exert strenuous efforts to promote English education. This study was conducted to investigate how elementary school teachers and their students perceived English education in an elementary school in Hsinchu, a major city in Taiwan. The researchers observed Grade 5 and 6 classes and interviewed a total of 24 students and 4 of their Taiwanese and foreign teachers. The results showed that the teachers had intense enthusiasm about grammar teaching and strong concerns about connecting the English education in elementary school with that of junior high school. Students, however, revealed that they had difficulties in acquiring English skills such as spelling and grammar knowledge while they found learning English to be important for their futures.

台湾は2001年に小学校5年生より導入した英語教育を2005年には小学校3年生から引き下げるなど、英語教育を精力的に推し進めている隣国の一つである。この研究は、小学校英語教育において日本に先駆けている台湾で、小学校教員および児童が英語教育をどのように捉えているのかを調査したものである。調査校は台湾の主要都市のひとつである新竹市の市街地にある小学校で、5、6年生の授業観察に加えて、24人の児童と4人の台湾人および外国人教員へのインタビューを行った。得られたデータの分析の結果、教師は中学への接続および文法指導が非常に重要であると感じていた。また、児童は、英語は将来役に立つと考えている一方で、綴りをはじめとするスキル中心の授業に困難を感じていることが強くうかがわれた。

TAIWAN IS one of the countries neighboring Japan that exert strenuous efforts to promote elementary school English education. According to the 9-Year Joint Curriculum Plan announced by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan in 2000, English education for students in grades 5 and 6 was to start in 2001. However, many cities and prefectures started English education before 2001, and in several urban cities such as Taipei, Hsinchu, and Taichung the students started learning English in grade 1. In order to narrow the gap between regions, the government decided to change its starting year to grade 3 in 2003, and the decision was implemented in 2005. Nevertheless, Taiwanese elementary school English education still has regional gaps: Some cities teach English starting in grade 1, and in Taipei city, students in grades 5 and 6 have three 40-minute classes per week at present.

The objectives of the English curriculum for Grades 1-9 are as follows:

1. improve students' basic communicative competence in reading, writing, speaking, and listening;

2. prepare students to make effective use of English language and knowledge;
3. choose topics relevant to students' daily lives, needs, and interests;
4. help develop students' autonomy in learning English;
5. address cross-cultural issues (e.g., social customs);
6. incorporate reading, writing, speaking, and listening into class activities; and
7. incorporate the use of technology in classes. (Su, 2006, p. 267)

In contrast to the curriculum of Foreign Language Activities, which was introduced into the core curriculum in Japan in 2011, the curriculum of Taiwanese English education is highly skill based; for instance, at the end of grade 6 children must have acquired at least 300 English words for oral communication and must be able to write 180 words as productive vocabulary. Skills students need to acquire are described in detail in the form of can-do statements covering the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and encompassing 9 years of English education.

To meet these goals, the teachers must be highly proficient in English; the government requires a TOEFL score of higher than 213 in the CBT (i.e., PBT: 550; iBT: 79-80). The Taiwanese Ministry of Education also makes efforts to establish a special teaching curriculum for fostering the skills of elementary school English teachers in a short period of time and to provide financial support for in-service teachers' training. The government also sends selected teachers abroad to participate in English seminars and professional development programs (MEXT, 2005). Furthermore, foreign teachers, who are native speakers of English with a teacher's license obtained in their native countries, are hired to supplement the number of English teachers, especially in rural areas (Beh, 2007). They are employed to

support Taiwanese English teachers by co-teaching with them as well as by creating teaching materials.

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary school teachers and their students perceive English education in Taiwan and to gain insights from Taiwanese English education.

For this study we used the theoretical framework of language teacher cognition constructed by Borg (2006). Based on the literature both in general and language education, Borg claimed that language teacher cognition is shaped by learning through schooling and professional coursework as well as classroom practice, which as a whole impacts language teaching. It is, therefore, of great importance to investigate what cognitions lie behind teachers' English language instruction.

Beh (2006) maintained that there were three factors that contributed to the implementation of elementary school English education in Taiwan: (a) neighboring countries' lowering of the age at which English was introduced, (b) growing demand of the society to start English education at public schools, and (c) increased interest in global competition. In this study we were especially concerned with the second factor, which might affect classroom practice as a contextual factor.

Literature Review

Research studies about Taiwanese teachers' perceptions regarding elementary school English education in Taiwan have revealed the teachers' need for high English proficiency. Butler (2004), for example, conducted comparative case studies on elementary school teachers' current and desired English proficiencies in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Self-accessing their English proficiency levels on a 5-level scale, Taiwanese teachers rated their current English proficiencies higher than did the teachers from the other two nations, and this was also the case with their desired levels of English proficiency. With regard to the teach-

ers' perceptions about the goals of elementary school English education, Taiwanese teachers tended to feel that acquiring the written language was as important as acquiring oral skills, which Butler claimed is also the government policy for language teaching in Taiwan.

Another study (Su, 2006) showed that while Taiwanese teachers are positive about the implementation of English in elementary schools, they face difficulties in planning lessons due to the constraints of large class sizes and mixed proficiency levels, as well as having to cope with parental overreaction and high expectations for their children's English learning. In reality, according to Chen's (2011) survey held in the central part of Taiwan, parental expectation is so high that 73.2% of the parents send their children to cram schools. Three major reasons for this are: (a) they want their children to take a more advanced EFL program in the cram school; (b) they are anxious about their children's falling behind in school; and (c) it is the "fashion." As for the students, they agree that English is a useful tool for them to pursue a better life in the future (Chen, 2011).

These studies show that both teachers and parents are enthusiastic about English education, but few studies have examined teachers' and students' perceptions from a teacher-cognition perspective. As knowing how teachers perceive English education is essential to understand why they choose particular teaching styles, we investigated what beliefs the teachers had about English education. We also investigated students' perceptions about the English instruction they were receiving. Studies have shown that if students like their English lessons, they are more motivated to study. Kunimoto (2005) conducted a study on the psychological factors of elementary school students learning English and found that the more the students liked English learning, the higher their willingness to communicate became. Through the use of a questionnaire, Fuchigami (2009) also demonstrated how the like or dislike of English activities

among grade 6 students influenced their perceived achievement and their motivation in English when they were in grade 7. Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) examined demotivators of Japanese high school students learning English and found that test scores, learning contents, and materials were the students' demotivating factors. Sakai and Kikuchi suggested that lessons that focused on grammar, lessons that used textbooks that included long or difficult passages, and low test scores were all perceived as strongly demotivating, especially for less motivated learners.

Since teachers in the school we investigated engaged in co-teaching just as is done in Japan, we also examined how they collaborated in planning and administering lessons. The research questions addressed are:

1. What do elementary English teachers believe about elementary school English education in Taiwan, and how do the students perceive learning English?
2. What do teachers think about co-teaching between a foreign teacher and a Taiwanese teacher? More specifically, do they have any problems?

The Study Site

The study was conducted at a public elementary school in Hsinchu city, Taiwan, in March 2012. In this school, grades 1 and 2 have one English class per week, which is team-taught by a Taiwanese teacher and a foreign teacher. Grades 3 through 6 have two English classes per week, one of which is team-taught and the other taught only by a Taiwanese teacher (see Table 1). It is important to note here that the Taiwanese teachers we interviewed were English teachers and they did not teach other subjects at the school. In other schools in Taiwan, homeroom teachers teach all subjects including English. The school in

our study used textbooks provided by the Hsinchu municipal government.

Table 1. English Classes

| Characteristics | Grades 1-2 | Grades 3-6 |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Number of classes per week | one 40-minute class | two 40-minute classes |
| Teaching styles | Co-teaching (a Taiwanese teacher and a native speaker of English) | Co-teaching (a Taiwanese teacher and a native speaker of English) Solo teaching (a Taiwanese teacher) |
| Textbooks | Provided by the Hsinchu municipal government | |

Participants

Four teachers, 12 students in grade 5, and 12 students in grade 6 participated in the semi-structured interviews. As is summarized in Table 2, Teacher A and Teacher P were Taiwanese, and Teacher T and Teacher J were foreign teachers who had teacher's licenses from their home countries. Taiwanese Teacher A started teaching English in the school under study in 2007, whereas Teacher P had completed an MA in TESOL in the UK. Teacher T was the only male foreign teacher in the school. He was born in the Philippines and moved to Canada with his family when he was in elementary school. Teacher J first started teaching English at a cram school in Taiwan soon after she graduated from college in South Africa. She had been teaching in this school for 3 1/2 years.

Table 2. Demographic Data of the Teachers

| Identifier | Sex | Teaching experience | Nationality |
|------------|--------|---------------------|--------------|
| Teacher A | Female | 5 years | Taiwan |
| Teacher P | Female | 11 years | Taiwan |
| Teacher T | Male | 10 years | Canada |
| Teacher J | Female | 3.5 years | South Africa |

Six students were chosen, based on the Taiwanese teachers' assessment, from the upper and lower levels in each grade; that is, we had 12 top students and 12 bottom students from grades 5 and 6 combined. This was to balance out the students' English levels in the study and also to investigate if differences in students' English levels had any influence on their perceptions. We interviewed 12 students each in 2 days. The interviews took 10 minutes per student.

Method

Triangulation was used to collect the data, that is, by class observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews both with teachers and students. We observed nine classes from grade 1 to grade 6 that amounted to 360 minutes, but we analyzed only two 40-minute lessons from grades 5 and 6 as we focused on these two grades in this study. We conducted the student interviews separately, with Taiwanese speakers as interpreters. One interpreter was a teacher from the school, who interpreted between English and Chinese, and the other was a fluent speaker of Japanese who interpreted between Japanese and Chinese. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and summarized into graphs.

Results

Class Observations

A grade 6 class conducted by Teacher P and Teacher T included routines, that is, asking about the date, the weather, and feelings; pattern practice; grammar explanation on prepositions and *be-verb* past tense; comprehension check by translating English into Chinese, and a lot of repetition drills of words and phrases the teachers introduced. A grade 5 class conducted by Teacher A and Teacher J was a review lesson of words, sounds, and spellings through playing games. This game-based lesson seemed as if it was conducted just for fun, but from the teachers' point of view, it was also for reminding students of what they had learned.

The Taiwanese teachers maintained rather formal and strict attitudes, whereas the foreign teachers appeared easygoing and made the classroom atmosphere pleasant. The students learned English through games and language activities, after they were taught grammar and new vocabulary explicitly. In the classes, foreign teachers almost always spoke English. Taiwanese teachers mostly spoke English, too, even when they introduced grammar items, but they also added detailed explanations in Chinese. While the foreign teachers mainly spoke, the Taiwanese teachers led and controlled the co-taught lessons.

Teachers' Perceptions

Bridging the Gap Between Elementary School and Junior High School

Teacher P, teaching grade 6 classes, was quite conscious about connecting English education at elementary school with that of junior high school. She believed that explicit grammar teaching and tests for checking comprehension were indispensable, and in fact her lessons were aimed at students' acquisition of English

skills such as producing sentences and spelling words correctly. She was not satisfied with the *fun* ways of teaching, such as through games, that the government suggested. Teacher P said,

Now they want us to play games to entertain the students . . . to have a happier atmosphere in class. Just don't want the kids feel bored or feel stressed. But I don't think they can learn a lot in that kind of way.

Teachers also struggled with the proficiency gaps among the students, and Teacher A was annoyed at the impolite manners of advanced level students. She said,

Those rich parents, they let their kids start their English learning from when they are in kindergarten or something like that. So those kids, they think that, "My English is great, and teacher, what you taught us is too easy. So, I don't want to listen to you." Some students are so good, and some students almost know nothing. So those students won't listen to you, and they're kind of rude. That really bothers us.

However, even though teachers knew that many of the students had already learned the material at cram schools, they had no choice but to teach starting with the basics if there were students who had not gone to a cram school.

Co-Teaching

All four teachers were quite positive about co-teaching between a Taiwanese teacher and a foreign teacher, but in different ways. Teacher P (Taiwanese) talked about the parents: "Parents are happy because their children can have a chance to hear native English speakers' pronunciation." Teacher A (Taiwanese) pointed out the skill of classroom management: "Lessons without a Taiwanese teacher will not work because some children

might not behave themselves if they are taught only by a foreign teacher." Teacher T (foreign teacher) referred to the languages: "It is a waste of time if I take 3-5 minutes to explain something which can be explained in a second by a Taiwanese teacher in Chinese." All the teachers agreed that using the students' native language provided effective support, especially for slow learners and those who did not attend cram school.

The Taiwanese teachers and the foreign teachers seemed to be cooperating well in their jobs. The Taiwanese teachers made the syllabus based on the textbooks while the foreign teachers made the lesson plans and played the main role when they co-taught. Taiwanese teachers planned their solo lessons, but they had discussions with the foreign teachers about what should be covered in each lesson.

Students' Perceptions

The first question to the students was whether they liked English or not (Figure 1). Students were asked to respond on a scale of 1-5, 5 being *strongly agree*, and 1 being *strongly disagree*. The results showed that only a little more than half of the students (54%) liked English. This percentage is rather low and we speculated that this could be because students were referring to English as a subject rather than as a class when asked if they liked English. Some grade 6 students often mentioned they liked English because their foreign teacher was "funny" and that they enjoyed playing games during the classes. Their responses might indicate that some students who responded *strongly agree* or *agree* did not like English as a subject but liked English as a class. In fact, among the students who neither liked nor disliked English (10 responses), some said they liked games, but they did not like taking tests, memorizing the words, or learning to spell them correctly. Indeed many more students may have responded more positively if we had asked if they liked English as a class. We should have clarified this point.

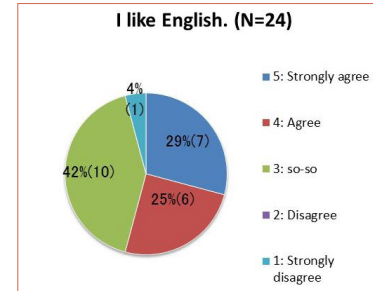


Figure 1. Students' Like or Dislike of English Learning

The second question was if they thought learning English was important (Figure 2). About 80% of the students responded that learning English was important. Some students mentioned that English was a tool for communicating with foreigners, and others said that it would be useful in their future. Some students responded that learning English was important because their parents said so. Another student, who rated it as a 3, said that English was necessary when speaking with a foreigner, but not with Taiwanese people.

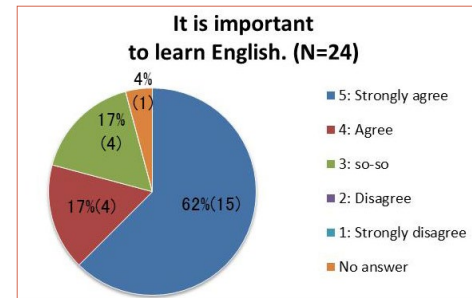


Figure 2. Students' Perceptions of the Importance of Learning English

Figure 3 shows how much the students understood what their teachers were saying. More than half of the students answered that they understood 80% or more.

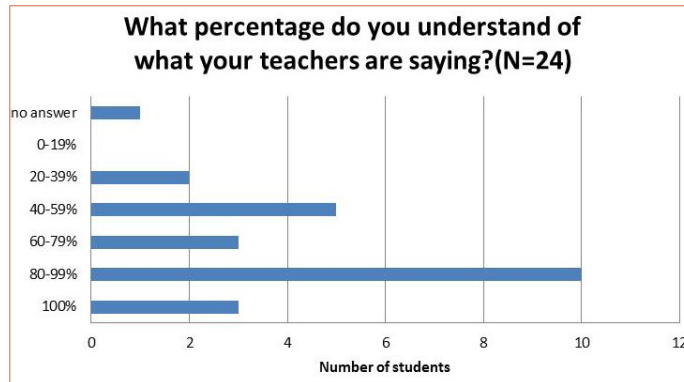


Figure 3. Students' Perceptions of Their Understanding of English

The next question was about their attendance at cram schools or English language schools (Figure 4). We asked this question to find out if our participants were attending English conversation schools because a high percentage of Taiwanese children are known to do so (Chen, 2011; Su, 2006). As it turns out, 71% of the students attended cram schools or English conversation schools. The length of classes varied depending on the school, but classes were usually 60 to 120 minutes.

Do you go to a cram school or an English school? (per week) (N=24)

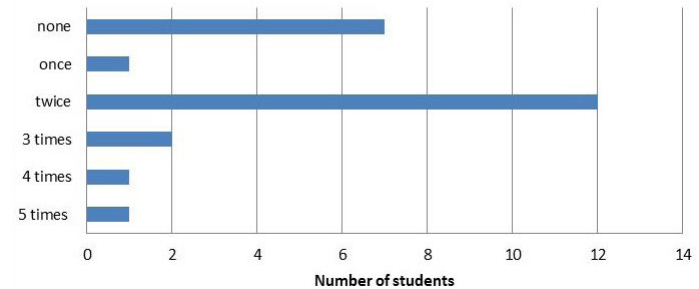


Figure 4. Frequency of Students' Cram School Attendance

Students' preferred teaching styles are shown in Figure 5. Eighty-eight percent of the students responded that they preferred co-teaching because Taiwanese teachers could help them in Chinese when they did not understand what teachers said in English. Another student said, "The more teachers we have, the more creative the lessons will be." Two students preferred classes taught only by a foreign teacher. One said that she could learn more in a foreign teacher's class, and the other said that a lesson without any Chinese would give her more chances to practice English conversation.

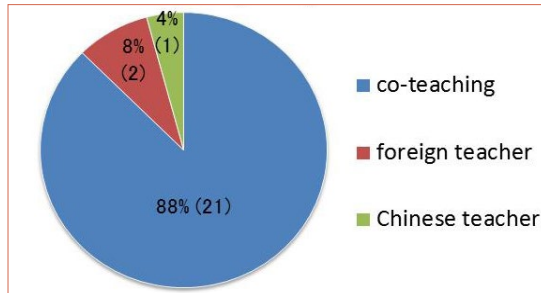


Figure 5. Students' Preferred Teaching Style (N = 24)

Discussion

The Taiwanese teachers considered that elementary school English education (ESEE) was not well connected to junior high school English education (JHEE) and that there was a huge level gap between the two. The elementary school English teachers knew what was taught in junior high schools and claimed there was a strong need to connect ESEE and JHEE by focusing on teaching English skills. They perceived that it was their responsibility to teach grammar and writing in order to alleviate the difficulties that their students might experience in learning English in junior high school.

The Taiwanese teachers mainly taught grammatical skills while the foreign teachers read stories and played games with students. The lessons were mainly taught in English, but Chinese was added where necessary and especially when details about grammar were explained.

While more than 80% of the students thought English was important to communicate with foreigners, only 54% of them responded that they liked English or English class. More than half of the students also answered they could understand more than 80% of what their teachers said, and about 70% of the stu-

dents studied English in cram schools. While the high percentage of the students' understanding of lessons may be the result of vigorous lessons conducted by enthusiastic teachers, strong emphasis on skill-based teaching may be the reason why only about half of the students liked English, as skill-based lessons are usually followed by a test, which is a demotivator (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Teachers cannot ignore this rather low percentage of students who like English, as this influences their willingness to communicate (Kunimoto, 2005) and their perceived achievement (Fuchigami, 2009).

The teachers' strong emphasis on skills and intensive skill-based teaching comes from their strong belief that building English skills is a way to improve students' English ability. They insisted that no learning would take place without teaching grammar, reading, and writing. These teachers are highly proficient English teachers who themselves learned English as a foreign language and have been teaching English at elementary schools for more than 5 years. Just as they believed about teaching English in Taiwan, it may indeed be inevitable to teach grammar in Japan as well, if we want students to improve their English abilities. What is important is not to avoid teaching English skills altogether but to consider how much we can incorporate teaching English skills in elementary school, and more importantly, to devise how the skills can be taught to elementary school students. Teachers must devise ways of teaching (e.g., activities) that suit elementary school students' developmental level. This should also be remembered in Japan when we think of connecting English education in elementary school with that of junior high school.

In the co-teaching that we observed, each teacher played a complementary role, with the foreign teacher giving plentiful oral input and the Taiwanese teacher consolidating the lesson by supplementing it with grammatical explanations. Their co-taught lessons were well devised and well implemented.

Students were active in class, and as a whole the classes were impressive. This style of co-teaching is possible because the Taiwanese English teachers have high English proficiency with good communication skills. When we think about effective co-teaching, we once again are reminded about the importance of teacher training to cultivate teachers' English abilities and teaching skills.

Conclusion

This study investigated through class observations, field notes, and interviews how elementary school teachers and their students perceived English education in Taiwan. Through our study, we found that the Taiwanese teachers stress teaching English skills in elementary schools. This is because they perceive that it is their job to connect elementary school English education to that of junior high school and that the teaching of skills was paramount in doing so. In our experience, teacher cognition in Japan seems more like how junior high school English can expand the knowledge students have gained in elementary school, but the Taiwanese teachers' cognition was to bring up the level of elementary students to that of junior high school.

English is not an official subject in elementary school in Japan currently and is only a foreign language activity, but if it is introduced into the core curriculum, elementary schools may be expected to raise the level of their English education so that it will connect better to that of junior high school, as is being done in Taiwan. Making English an official subject in Japan may also require highly proficient English teachers: Teachers may have to teach English skills, and teaching those skills may indeed be necessary to cultivate students' English proficiency and communicative abilities. One may worry that teaching skills to elementary school children may cause them to dislike learning English;

however, the current English education in Japan will not lead students to have high English proficiency as the curriculum is not developed and many teachers are not qualified as English teachers. We need to develop a sound curriculum as soon as possible and send proficient English teachers to elementary schools to better connect elementary English education to that of junior and senior high schools and to truly "cultivate Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT, 2003).

Limitations and Future Studies

There are some limitations in this research. First, since we were not able to speak Taiwanese, and some students wanted to speak English even though their proficiency in English was limited, there might have been some gaps between what the interviewees meant and what the interviewers perceived. Secondly, the research was conducted only in a single school, and research into more schools is needed if we are to generalize about English education in Taiwan.

Part of this study was based on students' perceptions. Although more than half of the students responded that they understood more than 80% of the lessons in English, we need more objective data to measure their English proficiency and whether the English education in Taiwan is truly effective. Also, only 54% of students responded that they liked English, but we need to investigate their likes and dislikes in relation to the skill-based teaching and the students' English levels. In addition, the current study covered teacher cognition and students' perceptions only in grades 5 and 6. Future research may employ a study on earlier English education (grades 1 through 4) to find out about teacher cognition about younger and lower English level students as this may also influence instruction and therefore students' likes and dislikes of English language learning.

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Bio Data

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