

# Teaching English from Elementary School in an Asian Context:

## A language-planning perspective

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A description of the role of language in the education system of any country is complicated by the number of languages involved, the different purpose for which they are used and the levels at which they are introduced. In Taiwan the languages involved can be classified into three types: the mother tongue, the national language, and other languages used for wider communication. The mother tongue may be Taiwanese (also called Southern Min), Hakka, Mandarin or one of the indigenous Austronesian Languages: Paiwan, Tsou, Amis, Atayal, Puyuma, Bunun, Saisiyat, Rukai and Yami. The national language of Taiwan is Mandarin. The major language for wider communication (LWC) taught in Taiwan is English, but Japanese, French, German and Spanish are also taught.

Language may be used for three purposes in education: for the development of literacy, as a subject of study, or as a medium of instruction. Finally, the levels at which the language are introduced can, for the purpose of the present discussion, also be categorized into three: (1) primary, (2) secondary, and (3) tertially.

If we concentrate on the range of languages involved and the purposes they serve, we will arrive at nine possibilities, each represented by a cell in the matrix shown in Table 1 below. Possibilities that are actually realized are shown as “O”, those which are unrealized are shown as “X”, and those whose states are unclear are marked as “?”.

*Table 1: Language Type and Function in Education in Taiwan*

Function Type	Literacy	Subject	Medium
Mother Tongue	O	?	O
Nat. Language	X	X	X
LWC	O	X	O

As is apparent in the table, Mandarin, the national language, has played a very important role in the system. It is taught to everybody, regardless of his or her mother tongue or home language, as a language for literacy. It is a subject which takes up from five to ten hours of instruction every week from the first grade up to the first year of college, and it is by far the most important subject in all primary and secondary courses. Finally, it is the sole medium of instruction in the school system.

In distinct contrast is the role of English in the system. It is required of every student in secondary school and the first year of college. Until 1970 it took up five hours of instruction per week in all years of

secondary education. However, when compulsory education was extended from six years to nine 1970, the hours of instruction in a week were cut down to 2-3 in the first two years of Junior High School.

Let us turn now to the third type of language in Table 1, the mother tongue. Despite its widely recognized importance in literacy, the mother tongue, except where it is also Mandarin, plays absolutely no role in literacy development and it was not until 1996 that it was marginally included into the system by allotting it one hour per week in the primary curriculum.

The practice, as described above, has existed for more than fifty years with only minor changes as pointed out in the previous discussion and it will remain unchanged until September of this year (2001) when two major changes will be introduced: namely, the mother tongue will be included as a required subject with two hours of instruction from grade one to grade six, and English will be a required subject starting from the fifth grade with two hours of instruction allotted.

This paper, by taking a language planning perspective, will go into a careful examination of the latter policy change, trying to determine whether the change is appropriate and timely.

### **Should English be taught from elementary school in Taiwan?**

As we said early, the ministry of Education in Taiwan

has made its decision that as of September 2001 English will be taught from the fifth grade. This is a major change in its foreign language education policy. Now judging from the past literature in language planning, a language policy change can be justified in the following ways: First, there is a large enough change in the need of the language in society that calls for a change in the instruction of the language. Secondly, a change is also justified if it can be ascertained that the change can produce better results. Thirdly and finally, a change in the language education system is justified only when it is also deemed to be feasible. In this section, we will go into three justifications in detail.

### **Continued economic growth calls for higher English proficiency level**

One of the most important reasons for the inclusion of English in the secondary school curriculum is that it can provide information access to the world of science and technology as the country seeks modernization and economic growth. It follows that we need to understand fully the economic changes that have prompted the advancement of English instruction to elementary school against the backdrop of the history of Taiwan's economic development in the past fifty years.

In the years immediately following World War II, when Taiwan was just restored to the Republic of China, it would have appeared inconceivable that Taiwan could

emerge from the rubble to become a respected place in the world as an exemplar of economic development. Some have attributed this rapid transformation to a miracle but I tend to agree with many others in regarding it as due to a number of factors, one of which is careful economic planning.

In fact, soon after the restoration of Taiwan to the Republic of China, a very successful land reform program was launched, which paved the way for later industrial development. The industrialization of Taiwan society took place from 1961 to 1980. In the total work force, the proportion of agricultural workers decreased dramatically from 56% in 1956 to 19% in 1983, while the proportion of the industrial workers increased significantly from 18% to 41% (Wen, 1983).

In the meantime, the per capita gross national product (GNP) of the country rose from US\$ 203,00 in 1950 to US\$ 2,344 in 1980 and to US\$ 12,439 in 1995.

With rapid economic growth, the role of English has been growing in importance. Judging from Taiwan's rapid economic growth, it seems that the teaching of English as an LWC has been quite successful. While this statement is true as far as it goes, it does not represent the whole picture. Taiwan's economic success in the past has been dependent on its abundant supply of manpower in labor-intensive industries and the level of English required has been quite low. Taiwan, however, is now at a turning point of development into the

kind of economy that depends more on skill-intensive industries. At this point, a steady supply of skilled manpower and technical know-how becomes a necessity. It is also at this point that LWCs, especially English, becomes increasingly important.

Consider a concrete case. Taiwan has launched an ambitious project to promote itself as an Asian-Pacific Operational Center. For such a project to be successful, it is estimated that the country would need at least half a million people, who, besides their specialized knowledge will have to be truly bilingual in English and Mandarin. By beginning English instruction in the fifth grade instead of the first year of the junior high, it is hoped that the English proficiency level of the people can be substantially raised.

### **Advancing English instruction to elementary school can produce better results in English teaching**

As we mentioned earlier, a much-proclaimed aim for the inclusion of English in the school curriculum is to enable people to gain access to the most up-to-date information in science and technology. One way to determine whether the aim has been attained or not is to test our school-leaving population, i.e. anybody who has finished his /her Freshman English in the case of Taiwan, whether they have the ability to pick up a manual in his/her field or a science article and read with

understanding. That our English education has evidently failed this aim is quite clear. Ask any college English professor whether their students in general possess this ability and the answer is a clear no.

While this failure can be attributed to a number of factors (Tsao,1993), the most important one, in my view, is due to the lack of opportunity in practicing reading on their own. This latter failure is again attributable to two inadequacies in the education system, the first related to teaching methodology and the second having to do with teaching material. Thus, it has often been observed that the grammar-translation method is still a prevalent one in our high school and college English teaching. Even though most English teachers are able to explain the grammatical structures involved and to translate the text into Chinese accurately, this is no way for teaching English reading and the reason is quite obvious. Learning to read is like learning to swim. No amount of explanation alone can teach you swimming. Likewise, one learns to read by being engaged in reading oneself.

Another factor that accounts for this failure in teaching reading is that there is a big gap between what a high school student is able to read and what he/she is interested in reading. That is, by the time students in Taiwan have mastered the basic reading skills that enable them to read on their own, they are probably in the senior high school. While students at this stage are

in general interested in materials that can satisfy their desire for new knowledge, the materials they can handle are restricted to such elementary materials as simplified or abridged classical stories, the content of which are long familiar to them through Chinese translation. An effective way to narrow the gap is to begin the instruction of English earlier so that by the time the students have learned the basic of English, they can still find materials that are of some interest to them. And in this way they can learn to read by reading on their own.

### **Socio-cultural changes have made it feasible to begin English instruction earlier**

Another important factor that determines the success or failure of this policy change is people's attitude toward the language and toward the inclusion of it in the elementary school curriculum. On both counts people's attitude has turned favorable over the years.

It used to be the case that even though English had been included in the secondary school curriculum all along, people's attitude in general was to regard it as an important instrument for scientific and technological advancement and economic growth. Some people even went as far as to claim that its importance should not be overemphasized lest its spread should hinder the development of nationalism. All this has been slowly changing over the years. As people in Taiwan have more and more contacts (business and others) with the outside

world, and as nationalism receives less and less emphasis in the educational system, a healthier attitude toward English has emerged. People are now more pragmatic in their attitude. Furthermore, many parents, realizing the importance of English and wishing to give their children a headstart, are sending their children to private English language programs after school. This in turn has induced many private and some public elementary schools to offer English lessons. With this favorable turn of attitude, time is ripe for including English into the elementary school curriculum.

In this connection there is another feasibility point we need to consider: Is there room in the elementary curriculum for the inclusion of English? As we mentioned in connection with our discussion of the language education system in Taiwan, Mandarin has been given as many as ten hours in the elementary school curriculum all these years. Now, in the fifties when the Nationalist government first ruled the island, this might be necessary as Mandarin was not the mother tongue of the majority of people in Taiwan, and available teachers and materials are scant. But the current situation is a far cry from that. A natural consequence of this change is that the hours used to be devoted to the teaching of Mandarin can be properly reduced, yielding room for the inclusion of English and the mother tongues.

## Concluding Remarks

In this short article, I have reported evidence from three different aspects to argue that English should be taught from elementary school in Taiwan. The three main arguments are: 1) Continued economic development in Taiwan calls for at least half a million people with specialized knowledge and a good command of both English and Mandarin. Since this is a requirement which the current system is unable to meet, adjustments need to be made. Advancing English instruction to the fifth grade in elementary school has been recommended as an effective way. 2) There are several advantages in beginning English instruction in elementary school with

the expected result of considerably improving the quality of English language education in Taiwan. 3) Within the current language education system, it is feasible, with certain adjustments made, to put the proposal to work.

Now since many Asian countries, as far as I can determine, are at about the same stage of socio-economic development as Taiwan and are facing the same problem in international communication, my arguments, which have been made on the basis of Taiwan data, can equally apply. I would therefore recommend that English be taught from elementary school in those Asian countries in a comparable situation as Taiwan.

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