

An Overall Evaluation of Elementary English Education in Taiwan

Kate Tzu-Ching Chen

Hungkuang University, Taiwan

Inter-cultural communication became especially important in Taiwan after the government decided to develop Taiwan into an Asian-Pacific economic center. This economic decree resulted in communication abilities becoming a primary expectation for all Taiwanese citizens. Knowing that, an appropriate place to begin to assess or improve the ability to communicate is to examine the educational system, and that review is the subject of this study. The researcher conducted a telephone survey that collected data from a random sample of 150 elementary English teachers throughout Taiwan to investigate teacher's practices and beliefs toward Elementary English Education in Taiwan. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure respondents' practices and beliefs. Data was analyzed using SPSS according to the seven pre-selected variables: teachers' qualifications and training, materials, teaching methods, assessment policies and practices, content/curriculum of English enclosures, environment, and culture. The open-ended questions revealed the survey participants found teachers hope to implement in the programs for increasing the number of qualified teachers, adding teacher qualification policies, and dividing students according to their English abilities. In addition, the teachers reflected that MOE made a smart move by implementing the program immediately upon realizing the importance of the English learning needs among elementary students.

Over eighty countries in the world have English as their most important

foreign language due, in part, to the globalization of world economies, the effects of technology, and especially because it has become the universal language of the internet. The teaching of English at elementary school levels has also been strongly recommended by many educators according to the result of a worldwide survey (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2000). In Taiwan, the Ministry of Education (MOE) declared a new policy of beginning the teaching of English in the fifth grade in the fall semester of 2001 to replace the previous policy of introducing English in the seventh grade. The teaching of English in Taiwan has taken a dramatic step toward preparing students to better communicate in the global society. A thorough evaluation of this new Elementary English Education (EEE) program is the next crucial step after its implementation and is the purpose of this study.

Researching the beliefs and practices of present day fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school English teachers in Taiwan provided the data which reflects current realities. In 1974, Girard gave a detailed report of several European early foreign language learning projects. He indicated some conditions and issues involved in implementing early foreign language learning programs which are similar to the results of this study. In assessing those perceptions, it revealed areas of strengths and weaknesses in the current Taiwanese EEE. Only if educators in Taiwan have an understanding of the current system and conditions will they be able to assess the effectiveness of the present model. This study investigates the following questions:

1. What differences exist between the practices and beliefs of present day fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school English teachers in Taiwan?
2. What are the changes from the current EEE policies/practices of MOE that elementary school English teachers wish to implement?
3. What are the most successful practices of the current EEE program in Taiwan?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Policies and Practices of Elementary English Education in Taiwan

In 2001, the paradigm shift of adding English courses to fifth and sixth grade was put into practice in Taiwan. The purposes and goals of elementary English curriculum according to the MOE are: (1) to enhance student's basic abilities of English communication skills, (2) to motivate students' interests in English language learning, and (3) to broaden students' cultural knowledge of Taiwan and foreign countries. The curriculum focuses mainly on listening and speaking skills for the purpose of reinforcing English oral communication ability.

The MOE conference report in 2001 specifically stated the policies of improving teaching quality as it is the major factor to achieve a successful educational program. Schools are responsible for encouraging present day teachers to participate in training courses and conferences regularly. All elementary school English teachers are required to meet either the intermediate level of the "National English Proficiency Exam" or a Computerized TOEFL score of 213 or above. The teacher qualification improvement plan was in the planning process at the time this article was written, and will be implemented.

Schools and teachers are authorized to choose teaching materials under the condition of fitting students' interests and needs. Teachers have to unitize the material efficiently and modify it for individual classes if necessary. The content should be practical, simple, attractive, stimulating, and should fulfill the goals of the Elementary English Curriculum set forth by the MOE. The activities should be integrated with the materials in terms of a variety of formations, such as songs, poems, greeting cards, notes, letters, stories, short articles, short plays, riddles, and jokes. Pronunciation skills should be learned from real time listening and speaking activities. Sentence patterns in the materials should be based on practical uses, and avoid difficult and abstract grammar. For those students who have a higher English proficiency, the

teachers should provide them with supplementary materials.

The curriculum should be coordinated with the goals in terms of diverse materials to reinforce students' listening and speaking abilities. English will be the primary language in the classroom to increase students' chances for practicing the language. Situational and teacher - student interaction methods are emphasized to replace the teacher centered model to form a communicative style. Computer assisted language learning software programs are adapted for the purpose of ensuring qualified teaching and significant learning outcomes. Teachers should use interesting stories and short articles only to establish students' reading abilities. Writing skills should only focus on copying and imitating words.

The variety of assessments should be used to analyze individual students' abilities and processes, students' study efforts, and learning attitudes of the assignments. The evaluation should be mainly based on the activities, such as oral practices, role-play, and teamwork instead of traditional written tests. The content should integrate with diverse educational technology to help students' learning. For the purpose of facilitating teaching and learning, a natural learning environment has to be created in schools including utilizing hallway decoration, bulletin boards, school radio, self-learning areas in the classrooms, teaching resource center, computer center, English teaching resources website, and so on. Target language countries' cultures as well as Chinese culture will be integrated into English teaching to help student's language learning.

Beliefs of Elementary School English Teachers in Taiwan

The beliefs of teachers are the primary resources to provide a thorough evaluation of the EEE for any necessary improvements (Qian, 1998). In Taiwan, the qualification of teachers is the most controversial educational challenge as it is the major influence in the success or failure of the students' learning (Huang, 1998). The lack of English training programs in college level classes resulted teachers who specialize in subjects other than English,

or who have insufficient English teaching experience and are forced to teach English (Ho, 1998; Lu, 1999). Some experts suggested filling these positions with native English speakers while others argued that Taiwanese English teachers understand more about the students' learning processes and will provide appropriate assistance (Chu, 1998; Lee, 1998). It is a common belief that teacher's training courses should be offered and EFL/ESL teaching programs in college level for college students need to be created (Shi, 1999). Most teachers deem that to be an eligible elementary school English teacher, the teacher needs to be knowledgeable in the aspects of the teaching methods, materials, educational psychology, and other curriculum areas (Cheng, 1998).

A majority of elementary school English teachers prefer choosing their own textbooks and supplementary materials (Ho, 1998; Shi, 1999); however, this sudden freedom has caused the discrepancy of textbook selections. Most teaching materials are imported and were not designed to fit the teaching and learning need of EEE in Taiwan. An effective material will be written specifically for EEE and integrated with educational technology (Liaw, 1999). In addition, the curriculum coherence of EEE with junior high school needs to be carefully planned (Huang, 1998).

The grammar translation method has produced students who can recite rules and translate passages from the native language to the target language and vice versa adeptly in Taiwan for years, but when exposed to oral communication challenges in real world situations, they were virtually helpless. Traditionally, English instruction in Taiwan has been teacher-centered and test-driven. The typical way of evaluating students' learning outcomes is through testing their memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules. Most students in Taiwan are trained as a test machines; they often answer questions correctly on the test sheets and do not know how to apply that knowledge in real life (Du, 1997). The purpose of assessment is not only to test the students' learning outcomes, but also to improve the teaching quality (Yang, 1995). The type of assessment the teachers should adopt is important in evaluating and developing the EEE. Since the goal of EEE focuses on listening and speaking, new ways of assessing students should be

used such as conversations, role-playing, songs, and so on, instead of the traditional pencil-based tests (Huang, 1998).

Children's English courses in cram schools have become excessively popular in Taiwan in the last decade to help students' English learning outside school. However, it has caused multiple levels of English proficiency among elementary school students in Taiwan. For delimiting the possible deficiencies, it is critical to plan an organized and systemized curriculum according to student's English proficiency level (Chen, 1998; Cheng, 1998). The design of curriculum should emphasize practical and simple content in order to inspire student's interests and their self-confidence of English learning (Huang, 1998; Lee, 1998; Shi, 1999). Some creative activities could be integrated into the curriculum such as greeting activities, songs, games, and role-playing situations (Cheng, 1998; Ho, 1998). Educational technology is in full force in the second language study arena and should be integrated into curriculum design, as it is a tool that is accessible and available in daily life through radio, television, and other media (Chang & Lee, 2000; Huang, 1998).

Learning English at an early age has been common in many countries for some time due to the need of global communication (Brewster & Ellis & Girard, 2000). In Taiwan, English is not spoken in daily life and therefore produces a limited English environment. Teachers have to contribute by creating learning environments in the classroom and school to ensure expected English learning achievements and to inspire student learning (Ho, 1998). It is the teachers' beliefs that students have to be able to immerse themselves in a pleasant English learning environment in order to learn the language efficiently. In addition, the class duration should be at least two hours a week for beginners, and the course should be intensive for higher achievement.

The English content often does not include culture as an integral component. As a result, people misinterpret the meaning of English words because they were not taught they could be very different in American culture (Chen, 1999). "To be meaningful, language must be culture bound and culture

specific” (Damen, 1987, p. 12). Culture influences the way English learners’ think and how they communicate with people from the rest of the world. The cultural barriers can be crucial in people’s language learning because language and culture are inseparable in a society (Robinett, 1978; Shi, 1980). Therefore, comprehension of English words depend on a clear understanding of the culture. Language is used to deliver meaning between human beings and meaning is determined by culture (Deng, 1994). This is also the rationale for integrating basic cultural information into English curriculum. Robinett (1978) pointed that culture is reflected in the lexicon of the language of that society. Today, people have realized that intercultural interactions of learning English can be frustrating or exciting depending on the comprehension of the culture (Chou, 1995). Taiwanese educators should integrate the teaching of target language countries’ cultures as well as Chinese culture with English teaching when designing the curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

Demographic Information

The population of the study was all English teachers from 2,583 elementary schools in Taiwan. The random selection of 210 schools was to guarantee the predetermined number of 150 responses would be collected. The survey was administered to one teacher from each selected elementary school with approximately 10 teachers per day and lasted for three weeks. The survey was sent to the selected elementary schools in three regions: Northern, Central, and Southern with equal sample numbers. The participants were 32 male teachers and 118 female teachers. 76 teachers were in the age range of 20 to 30 years old, 15 teachers were between 31 to 40 years old, and 23 teachers were between 41-50 years old. 69.33% of the respondents are college graduates and 29.33% of them have master’s degrees. The respondents’ study abroad locations are limited to the

English speaking countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and so on.

According to the statistics, the majority of the respondents (76.67%) have no experiences or less than one year of experience of studying abroad. Only 5.33% have more than five years of experience in an English-speaking country. 92% of the participants have less than four years of elementary school English teaching experience. There were 58 respondents teaching both fifth and sixth grades and 48 teachers teach in the lower grades in addition to the fifth and sixth grades.

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The study adapted telephone survey procedure because of its economy and convenience of using a researcher-developed questionnaire. The questionnaire is comprised of 49 items which contain questions about teacher's beliefs and practices toward EEE. The questionnaire was pilot tested and revised before the actual survey. Each respondent's answer was recorded under respondents' authorizations for further investigations. Information obtained from the survey instrument was analyzed primarily using descriptive and inferential statistics in terms of SPSS. The responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using private audience content specifically designed to interpret on depth interviews. The .05 level of significance was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Differences between Teachers' Practices and Beliefs

The independent *t* test was conducted to evaluate whether teachers' practices match their beliefs regarding EEE. The results were presented based on seven variables as listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Teachers' Practices and Beliefs for Elementary English Education in Taiwan

Item	Practices		Beliefs		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Means</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>Teachers' qualifications and training</i>						
Qualification exam indicates	3.13	.96	3.10	.97	.28	.79
Sufficient knowledge	4.01	.78	2.79	.97	2.60	.00*
Sufficient training program	2.87	1.08	4.48	.58	5.79	.00*
Teaching support	2.79	1.01	4.44	.60	7.22	.00*
<i>Materials</i>						
Right to choose materials	4.33	.77	4.62	.54	4.66	.00
Materials based on real life	4.03	.86	4.45	.66	4.96	.00
Integrated with technology	4.18	.86	4.27	.82	1.04	.30
<i>Teaching Methods</i>						
Integrated with Activities	4.23	.59	4.49	.58	.20	.85
Fit students' abilities	4.08	.65	4.49	.69	5.80	.00*
<i>Assessment policies and practices</i>						
Variety of assessments used	4.41	.59	4.39	.76	.38	.71
Alternative assessments	4.29	.62	4.07	.78	3.49	.00
<i>Content/curriculum of English enclosures</i>						
Focus on listening & speaking	4.42	.62	4.11	.97	3.39	.00
Increase student's interests and self-confidence	4.09	.68	4.59	.53	7.92	.00*
Utilize teaching components	3.90	.80	4.44	.64	7.65	.00*
<i>Environment</i>						
Natural learning environment	3.81	.81	4.35	.70	6.80	.00*
Sufficient class periods a week	2.97	1.88	4.53	.90	9.17	.00*
No cram/coaching schools	2.05	.92	2.71	.99	6.55	.00*
Start from fifth grade	2.40	1.86	2.07	1.16	1.94	.06
<i>Culture</i>						
Integrated with cultures	4.01	4.51	.80	.59	7.18	.00*
Introduce American culture	4.09	3.90	.67	.84	3.03	.00

$p < .05$

In the variable concerning teachers' qualifications, teachers' practices ($M=4.01$) were significantly different from their beliefs ($M=2.79$) on the issue of sufficient knowledge to teach English courses in the elementary schools ($t=2.60, p=.00$). It indicated that teachers tended to believe that they had sufficient knowledge in teaching English, but do not believe all the other present day teachers have the same competence. Teachers' practices ($M=2.87$) were significantly different from their beliefs ($M=4.48$) regarding the teacher's training program ($t= 5.79, p=.00$). Most respondents believed that they need to have sufficient training opportunities while there were not enough programs to supply this need. Teachers' practices ($M=2.79$) are significantly different from their beliefs ($M=4.44$) regarding teaching support ($t=7.22, p=.00$). This information reflected that most participants believed that they needed to have support from the schools or the MOE while insufficient support was given.

The t test results revealed that teachers tended to believe that teaching methods should be designed according to students' abilities not teachers' preferences while most of them ($M=4.08, t=5.80, p=.00$), use their favorite methods instead. Most teachers ($M=4.59, t=7.92, p=.00$), believed that class content has to place emphasis on inspiring students' interests and self-confidence in learning English while fewer participants' course contents ($M=4.09$) actually follow this concept. Also, fewer participants ($M=3.90$) had been utilizing teaching components to help their teaching. However, to ensure student's learning outcomes, many teachers ($M=4.44, t=7.65, p=.00$) believed that they should design or choose course content to utilize teaching components such as educational technology, visual aids (pictures, flash cards, etc), textbooks, and so on.

In environment, fewer participants ($M=3.81$) responded that they had created a natural environment for students than those participants ($M=4.35$) who agreed that teachers need to create a natural language environment ($t=6.80, p=.00$). The minorities of the participants' schools ($M=2.97$) were having English courses more than two class periods a week while the result indicated that most participants ($M=4.53$) believed that elementary school

English courses should be two class periods or more a week ($t=9.17, p=.00$).

Most students in participants' schools ($M=2.05$) were attending Children's English classes in cram/coaching schools while fewer teachers ($M=2.71$) agreed the need of attending cram/coaching schools after the implementation of the Elementary English Education ($t=6.55, p=.00$). The t -test results showed that more participants ($M=4.51$) believed the curriculum design should integrate the Taiwanese culture as well as American culture than teachers ($M=4.01$) who actually designed the curriculum with both Taiwanese and American cultures ($t=7.18, p=.00$).

Changes Teachers Hope to Implement

The participants' responses were analyzed and are presented in the ranking manner according to the frequency of occurrence in the responses.

Elementary School English Teacher Related Issues

The problems of the insufficient number of English teachers and teachers' qualifications were the priority issues. The shortage of elementary school English teachers resulted in the teachers' failures to provide individual teaching. Knowing the need of qualified teachers, the national elementary school English teacher's qualification examination was held at the beginning of EEE. Unfortunately, it did not select enough teachers for this urgent need, especially with some qualified test takers dropping out of the training courses halfway through. While school administrators continue reporting the insufficient number of teachers, some potential elementary school English teachers who are eligible and are willing to devote themselves in this field, find no policy from the MOE to qualify them.

It is often suggested that colleges and universities provide more training programs for prospective teachers. Unfortunately, the existing training programs are not consistent due to the changeable educational regulation. The program duration varies from two days to two years of training. It is a

common belief that a policy of teacher's qualification and training should be established. In addition, most English teachers are hired as classroom teachers which require them to be responsible for all matters in the class they are assigned. As a result, the extra administrative work besides the regular teaching takes up most of their time. The study found that most teachers hope to become subject teachers who concentrate only on English teaching to ensure the quality learning results of the students.

Dividing Students According to Their English Abilities

The trend of attending children's English courses in cram/coaching schools resulted a variety of English abilities among elementary students. By the time the EEE program started, some students have already had more than five years of English learning experiences. This situation generated teaching difficulties that educators suggested children be divided into classes according to their English ability levels. However, parents disagreed with this arrangement because they do not wish their children to be placed in lower level classes. Furthermore, the evaluation of students' English abilities would be a hard task and will cause controversy.

Age, Class Size, and Classroom Management

English learning at the elementary school level should be as early as first grade or even start from kindergarten based on the theories regarding the advantages of learning a foreign or second language at an earlier age. On average, the class size of the elementary schools is 30-35 students, which makes classroom management difficult for teachers. The teachers' great hope is to reduce the class size to fewer than 20 students, and 15 is the most desired class size. They believed that small class size will benefit classroom management and increase the individual instruction. Currently, with only one or two English teachers in most schools, a teacher would have to teach 10-15 classes with a total of more than 300 students. Under these circumstances,

teachers felt that they would not have enough time to get to know their students, keep up with the curriculum, and maintain good classroom management.

Learning Environment Issues

The official language in Taiwan is Mandarin. Even though English is going to be one of the official languages within six years, people in Taiwan do not use English to communicate with others. It is suggested that the learning of English should involve in parents' cooperation at home to help students' learning achievements. Further, English class is scheduled for only once a week so students forget what they learned the week before. Many teachers believe that more English class time is necessary for students to practice as often as possible. Some students choose not to speak English in the class because they are afraid that others would laugh at them when they make mistakes. To inspire student's learning then becomes an important mission to the teachers.

Some schools located in the rural area do not take English learning as seriously as people in the city. This has stopped students from learning the language. Further, most teachers have to carry all the teaching tools with them to the class and move from one classroom to another. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers to create a natural language environment for their students. Teachers believed that a classroom specifically for language teaching would save them preparation time and benefit student's learning. Teaching equipment, such as projectors, computers, and other technological tools should be provided by the school to facilitate teaching. Teachers in the city are getting more teaching resources than teachers in the rural area. For example, publishers would rather present their materials to schools in the city than in the countryside because of the larger market in the cities. Some resources have never been available to schools outside the cities.

Support from the MOE and Schools for Teaching Needs

Teachers ruminate that there are not sufficient teacher training programs available, and most training courses are provided by publishers for selling their teaching materials. Some teachers also thought that the existing training programs have a heavy emphasis on theory, but lack the practical use of the English curriculum. This phenomenon shows the need of increasing authorized training programs, conferences, and workshops.

The differences between English accents in countries can be enormous and confusing from one to the other for English language learners. For those teachers who do not have the experiences of studying abroad in the English speaking countries, they found it is hard to distinguish English accents. Nor do they know the daily English usage. For these reasons, present day teachers' study abroad opportunities are highly recommended to be provided from the MOE and schools.

Teaching Materials

The teachers reported the design of material did not correspondence with appropriate activities for students in the sixth grade. Most teachers felt that the current activities in sixth graders' materials were actually designed for lower grades; especially games which are not suitable for sixth graders. Another issue is that the design of elementary English materials mainly focuses on the development of listening and speaking abilities, the content does not correspond to materials for junior high school's English curriculum goal of training reading and writing abilities. The English curriculum connection between elementary schools and junior high schools is not connected. The curriculum planners should have a good understanding of the real teaching world by observing classes in schools located in different regions.

Educational Technology and American Culture

Teachers suggested that technology to be widely used for teaching

purposes and related training courses be provided. Some teachers felt that Mandarin should also be used to help students' learning in classes for a better understanding of the materials, but frequent contacts with Target language countries' culture (American culture as indicated by the MOE) are needed for enhancing language learning.

Bilingual Program or English as a Second Language Program

The Taiwanese government is making English one of the official languages, the question of whether the government tries to make English curriculum a bilingual program or English as a foreign language program has been asked. The respondents were unsure if the government has made the decision on this issue and therefore often confuse when setting up the correspondent curriculum goal.

The Most Successful Policy and Practices

Regardless of the unsophisticated planning, the government has started to emphasize English learning in the elementary school level. Unlike the old program focusing mostly on writing and reading, students' English communication abilities have improved. Students use English more and enjoy learning English at school. Students' motivations and interests in learning English have significantly increased, especially without the pressure of examinations. English teaching used to be based on the selected textbooks and limited learning in the classroom. It had neither practical use, nor was it related to real life. With the implementation of the new program, the design of the program focuses on learning English naturally and students have learned to use English in their daily life.

Additionally, most teachers started to realize the advantages of using technological tools to assist their teaching. For those parents who can not afford to send their children to English courses in the Cram/coaching School, the elementary schools now provide the chance to learn English. Teachers in

the new program tend to be more enthusiastic and patient than teachers in the old program in junior high schools. They loved attending conferences and workshops to improve their teaching and tended to try a variety of teaching methods and materials. Also, elementary school English teacher's qualification is generally better than teachers in junior high levels. People in Taiwan have realized the urgent need to learn English, as it has become one of the subjects in the Elementary School Curriculum.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prospective teachers often feel confused when selecting the appropriate teaching certificate programs because the various requirements and program duration from one day up to a year. Some teachers stated that they have sufficient knowledge and many years of teaching experiences in the field, but are still considered to be unqualified. Teachers suggested an alternative solution would be to hire native English speaking teachers to join the elementary school English education in Taiwan. Currently, most conferences, workshops, or training programs are provided by the teaching material/textbook publishers. The improvement of English ability among students is the priority issue for improving EEE.

One of the EEE teaching goals is to encourage students to use English as often as possible in daily life and thus improve their English abilities. Teaching materials in the market were mostly focused on oral skills due to the Elementary School English Standards from the MOE. The situation of test-driven and writing and reading based learning has been reversed by the new program. Parents and the communities are recommended to participate in the EEE program, especially in the rural areas. They do not feel the competition of the economy and the need of learning English and therefore ignore the importance of their children's English learning. It is obvious that when an education program is implemented hastily, two major problems are the shortage of qualified teachers and appropriate materials. Kouega's study

of English in Francophone Elementary School Grades in Cameroon in 2003 also confirmed this result.

Recommendations are as follows:

1. Elementary school English teacher's qualification regulations have to be made and the requirements have to be set by MOE to determine qualified English teachers.
2. Training programs should be available for all elementary school English teachers as well as full support. Teachers need to have opportunities to study abroad to strengthen their English language and cultural knowledge.
3. Students should be divided into classes according to their English abilities.
4. More teaching materials should be developed in the market to fit students' needs.
5. The government needs to make sure that schools in the rural areas have sufficient teaching resources.
6. Teaching tools such as visual aids and educational technology should be available for teachers, and language classrooms are needed in every school.
7. The elementary school English program should start earlier than fifth grade.
8. The length of English classes should be at least two class periods.
9. The class size should be reduced to be less than 20 students for easy classroom management and more personalized instruction.
10. English materials should connect the elementary school curriculum to the junior high school curriculum.

Since this program is still in the experimental process, a future replicated study could be conducted to re-evaluate the program for the purpose of researching progress that has been made in the areas of need identified in this study. Such replication will help to determine the changes that have been made through time. Further follow-up studies could also address each of the seven variables to gain depth of knowledge, and especially to study the area of teacher's qualification, the most critical issue.

THE AUTHOR

Kate Chen is an assistant professor of Applied Foreign Language Department at HungKuang University in Taiwan. She is currently engaging in researches on the English learning strategy for developing English learning materials and children's English teaching. She also received a government sponsored research on educational technology in the area of primary English teaching.

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