

Moving Towards a More Balanced English Teaching: A Case from Taiwanese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

In recent years, learning English has become a national movement. This article examines the national K-12 English curriculum in Taiwan, with specific criticism offered against some of the prevailing practices that occur in Taiwanese classrooms. Influenced by the philosophy of essentialism and by an institutional regard for college and high school entrance requirements, many Taiwanese teachers spend their time teaching to the tests. But the tests only assess a partial range of skills and knowledge that successful language learners need. Teaching is not neutral. So if we examine the implicit curriculum, we could begin to appreciate some of the latent messages sent by schools in Taiwan, including important ones about reading and writing skills and the attitudes toward learning. Even the register of speech varieties and the sociolinguistics aspects of language play some role in the implicit curriculum. At last, the implications of ACTFL standards for language teaching and learning are discussed to further guide the English curriculum in Taiwan.

Keywords: Curriculum essentialism, Language teaching and learning, Implicit curriculum, Null curriculum, ACTFL standards

1. Introduction

The teaching English as a second language is widely popular in first world nations. In many cases, the teaching of English is tied to the purpose of preparing students for high grades in high school and college entrance exams. For others, it might be more in line with the preparation of students for a competitive workforce in the future. As Reagan & Osborn, (2001, p3) observed, “in societies in which language learning is considered to be an essential component of a child’s education, children routinely begin the study of foreign language very early in their schooling”. This is clearly the case in Taiwan.

1.1 *The High-Value of English Teaching and Learning in Taiwan*

Education is highly valued by Asians, and schools are regarded as the main source for exposing students to the wisdom embodied in the taught knowledge and skills. Recent efforts have resulted in extending the required English language curriculum in Taiwan downward from junior high to the elementary school. Some schools in Taipei City, for instance, start teaching English in the first or second grade, believing that earlier second language learning experiences are better ones. In this case, English curriculum will gain more weight in students’ curriculum. But teaching is not a neutral act, and such a decision carries important latent effects. It harbors various values at both its planning and its implementational stages. In this paper, I am going to examine the latent effects of the main factors that influence and shape the English curriculum in Taiwan.

1.2 *The regulation of K-12 English textbook*

In order to fully comprehend a school curriculum, one must consider the educational setting in a broader social context. In Taiwan, because local government is subject to the central government, in this case, National Ministry of Education, schools have no right to design their own curriculum or choose their own textbooks. Such matters are prescribed by the central government. In fact, it was not until 1996 that the textbooks were even allowed to be produced by private publishers (Law, 2002). And it was not until 2002 that private textbooks started appearing in public schools. Even though textbooks can now be sold by private publishers, the Ministry of Education still controls and regulates the use of textbooks in schools by “[prescribing] standard curriculum upon which textbooks are assessed, and [giving] the final approval of textbooks” (Law, 2002, p. 69). Private publishers usually publish two to three different textbooks because of the need to deal with wide discrepancies in the students’ language ability. In addition, students below the college level do not have the choice to take the courses they want to take in the

fulfillment of their required credits. Instead, their courses are decided and fixed by their schools, which as we know, are subject to the regulation of the local and central government.

2. The Philosophy, Design and Objective of Taiwanese English Curriculum

Before taking a close examination of the curriculum objectives, it is necessary to understand the philosophy behind school design in Taiwan's English curriculum.

2.1 English Curriculum Philosophy in Taiwan

The use of philosophy in the operation of a curriculum has been described by Tyler (1949) as a screen that filters ideas. Philosophy, in this sense, helps educators to "crystallize and focus the purposes and objectives of the classroom, ultimately sharpening the teacher's sense of why she is doing and what she is doing" (Hlebowitsh, 2007, p. 99). The use of a teaching philosophy reflects the commitments that the school supports and instructional approaches that others can evaluate. As Hlebowitsh observed "a philosophy of teaching is a matter of living by an ideal; it is a compass that orients the instruction" (2007, p. 99).

2.1.2 Essentialism

In general, the school of Taiwanese education is tied to a subject-centered perspective that is historically associated with essentialists' thinking. To the essentialist, students should be instilled with the "essential" academic knowledge that will make them both smart and virtuous. Learning is a matter of immersion in a set of subjects, rationalized by the embrace of the doctrine of mental discipline. The educational focus tends to be very much subject-centered, academic in order for students to master certain intellectual skills and academic knowledge. It is a strictly academic pursuit accompanied by a discipline-centered curriculum (Hlebowitsh, 2004).

2.2 English Curriculum Design in Taiwan

Goodlad (1984) identified four key purposes of schoolings: academic, vocational, social and civic, and personal goals. They represent the normative dimensions of the school, as each of the purposes has a place in virtually every school, with degrees of differences across communities. In Taiwan, schools are supposed to teach the fundamental skills of literacy, numeracy, and knowledge in the disciplinary subject areas. Vocational education has always been neglected, and the issue of diversity is excluded. This is partly a function of an essentialist mindset that puts the training of the mind above all other purposes and by implication, emphasizes students' academic preparation as the main, if not exclusive, objective of the school. The effect is a standard program of disciplined intellectual training in core academic areas that prepares students for a university education.

2.3 English Curriculum Objectives in Taiwan

The term, curriculum, can be defined as the content, skills and goals used by teachers to create learning activities for particular classes and students (Beauchamp, 1982). In English class, according to the English Curriculum Outline published by Ministry of Education (2009), several curriculum objectives need to be achieved in the English courses before students graduate from senior school. These include:

2.3.1 To enhance integrated skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing as applicable productive skills to daily communication.

2.3.2 To develop abilities in logical thinking, critical analysis, and judgment as well as skills of integration and innovation in English.

2.3.3 To set up a foundation for life-long learning by establishing effective English learning methods and strengthening self-teaching abilities.

2.3.4 To cultivate an interest and a positive attitude in English learning as well as the initiative in acquiring multidisciplinary knowledge so that students' knowledge and skills in both humanities and science will be enhanced.

2.3.5 To promote an understanding of and respect for multiple cultures and develop an international perspective and a global view.

3. The High-stakes Entrance Exam

However, in order to perform well on the entrance exams, students learn that some of the objectives will be taken more seriously by the teachers than others and some objectives will be flatly ignored in real classrooms. As Zumwalt (1989) explained, "Decisions, made explicitly or implicitly during the planning and interactive phases of teaching, influence and are influenced by one's vision of what one hopes students learn" (p. 175). When talking about the school curriculum in Taiwan, one cannot ignore the large-scale exams. Because the high school and college entrance

exams really play a dramatically important role in the Taiwanese educational system, every subject included in the exam is highly valued in the classroom. It is assumed that the higher one scores on the test, the better the odds of being admitted into a good university, which, to a large extent, also determines whether one will be able to get high paying jobs and high social status in the society (Shive, 2000).

4. Implicit Curriculum

Eisner (2002) defines the implicit curriculum, (which is also sometimes referred to as the latent curriculum, the covert curriculum or the hidden curriculum), as that part of the school experience in which ideas and attitudes are communicated to students latently, usually in highly nuanced ways inside or outside the classroom. Many of these transmitted ideas are as important as the explicit lectures.

4.1 The Less Emphasis of Listening and Speaking

In the case of Taiwanese English curriculum, teachers regularly use reading and writing as assignments and assessments. In order to get high grades in English, students commonly memorize all the dialogues, short passages, and long essays and then subject themselves to mock exams that cover the content of the entrance exams (Gonzalez, Chen and Sanchez, 2001). The entrance exam leaves little room for listening and speaking skills. Consequently, EFL classes in Taiwan, and China by extension, send a latent message about the relative importance of reading and writing skills, the importance of the entrance exams and the relative non-importance of listening and speaking skills.

Unique Chinese cultural conditions produce highly formal and hierarchical relationships between the teachers and students (Wenzhong & Grove, 1999). Students should always address their teachers as “Teacher” or by their surname. They should stand up and use the respectful form of “you” (nin) when talking to their teachers. A Chinese saying goes that, “Once you’re teacher, you’re father for life”. For the Chinese, it is very rude to address people by their given names if one is talking to someone who is older, especially if they are a teacher. It is said that the nature of a teacher is to teach his students to be righteous men, to provide his students with knowledge, and to answer their questions and solve their problems. It is believed that the teachers are the authorities and usually the only ones who talk in the classrooms, and “students are supposed to pay respect to their teachers by listening attentively to the teachers’ instruction and do what their teachers ask them to do” (He, 1996, p.35). Imagine the difficulty of emphasizing the importance of speaking and listening in an EFL classroom under such conditions.

4.2 Students’ Self-criticizing and Self-effacing

Given the cultural legacy of Confucius (Ebsworth & Ebsworth, 2000), teachers are also supposed to be models for students both in and outside of the classroom, which is why in a Chinese classroom a teacher is seen as the absolute authority on virtually all matters and students are expected to follow whatever instructions the teacher gives. Students are supposed to be humble and modest and be prepared to devalue their own work in front of others. The cultural expectations influence the implicit curriculum in this way. Students are supposed to be self-criticizing and self-effacing in the Taiwanese context which sometimes comes across as lacking in confident and unassertiveness in the American context.

4.3 The Less Emphasis of Flexible and Nimble

In contrast, Americans worry little about fact accumulation and instead tend to focus on knowing where to find facts and use them creatively. “American professors usually give essay tests or assign presentations which enable students to elaborate freely and to think creatively rather than answering the definite right or wrong answers in multiple choices” (Wenzhong & Grove, 1999, p. 83). It is argued that the multiple-choice test items are thought to encourage negative effects by forcing teachers and students to focus on test preparation rather than wide learning purposes. Therefore, American students are more flexible and nimble in finding answers instead of trying to memorize each word in the textbooks and have a healthier attitude toward doing problem-focused routines.

5. Null curriculum

The null curriculum, coined by Eisner, represents what the school has decided to not teach or unintentionally omits and thus becomes an analytical device for understanding the nature of bias and priority in school decision making. High stakes exams typically reflect what is most important to school curriculum, so noticing what is not on the high stakes exam gives us a pretty strong sense of the null curriculum.

5.1 The Lack of Cultural Knowledge

A feature of the null curriculum in Taiwan is associated with cultural knowledge, what Kramersch observed as, “the system of major values, habitual patterns of thought, and certain prevalent assumptions about human nature and society with the foreigners should be prepared to encounter” (Kramersch, 1993, p. 177). With the globalization,

language learners today must not only understand the target culture, but also have an appreciation for different cultural values and different ethnicities. Yet in the Taiwanese English classroom, such an effort to reach out to cultural values is ignored, in the Taiwanese English classroom.

5.2 The Lack of Pragmatics Knowledge

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), adapted from Canale and Swain's previous work, two broad categories of language knowledge are organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. As demonstrated, knowledge of pragmatics- "creating or interpreting discourse by relating utterances or sentences and texts to their meanings, to the intentions of language users, and to relevant characteristics of the language use setting" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68). This could be seen from their model, Appendix 1. The pragmatic feature includes the register of speech varieties and the sociolinguistics aspects of languages, all of which are usually ignored in the classroom and reside in the null curriculum.

5.3 The Lack of Learner-Centered Approach

The main instructional approach in Taiwan is the traditional direct instructional approach, which focuses on the mastery of key facts and ideas. Teachers typically start their lessons with lecture and demonstration, which is then followed by some practice and review. The curriculum is designed to be teacher proof because the textbook is really the curriculum and exams are linked to the text. Teachers are responsible for the coverage of academic content, and for whatever is stated in the syllabus or scripted in the textbook. This again determines the role of a teacher as a knowledge provider rather than a learning facilitator. Also, teaching according to the textbooks allows for little discretionary space for both pre-service and in-service teachers. The learner-centered approach supports logical thinking and skills of analysis, but in Taiwan it might not work out well in reality, as students will likely respond with silence and with a general reluctance to raise questions or initiate discussions (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004).

5.4 The Lack of Creative and Authentic Learning Environment

Additionally, under the pedagogy of memorization and recitation, students learning English in Taiwan will be able to read text well but will have difficulty producing written text that sounds natural and authentic in English. This is partly a function of the decontextualized approach used in the teaching of the English language. As a result, it is difficult for Taiwanese students to cultivate interests in English and become life-long learners of English when the whole of their learning experiences is drawn from the selected texts and application of grammatical principles and vocabulary, sometimes with the help of a bilingual dictionary. So bottom-up reading strategies are normally used when Chinese learners are taught English reading as they "carefully scrutinize each word in the text and memorize grammar rules and exceptions" (Abbott, 2006, p.639).

6. ACTFL Standards and its implications

In 1982, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) published the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, with subsequent revisions, which described appropriate language use for learners at the novice to superior levels of performance. The document supported the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

6.1 The Five Cs

ACTFL and other foreign language institutes have since developed the five foreign language standards: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities, known as five Cs, which are the primary standard for assessing a foreign language. If we analyze our Taiwanese English curriculum with these standards, we find little overlap between what is actually being taught in schools and the standards of learning supported in the five Cs and in the English curriculum objectives. Because the centralized entrance exam can dictate to teachers what to teach and even what material to use, one finds that there is little room for teachers to embed their own perspectives in the classroom (Shohamy, 2001). That's why Taiwanese TOEFL scores tend to again fall behind other Asian countries and why many Taiwanese students find themselves unable to communicate fluently when studying abroad.

6.2 The Current Situation of Unbalanced English Teaching

Chinese people believe that scoring high on important exams will allow people to achieve greater goals, and to climb upward on the socioeconomic ladder in the future. However, an overemphasis on the test scores can lead to the negligence of learners' overall learning ability. In the case of English learning, students tend to have a good command of grammatical knowledge yet a lack of pragmatic linguistic competence. Similarly, teachers and schools are evaluated only based on "how many of [their students] get into the top universities" or passed an important exam (Shive, 2000). Thus, the superficial trappings of lectures and assignments without the appreciation of knowledge are built into the whole system of evaluation. These measures serve to underscore only the most technical views of

language learning, and they serve to encourage the most deskilled teaching approach (Meier, 2002).

7. Conclusions and suggestions

In conclusion, under the entrance exam, the K-12 English curriculum implicitly tends to create an imbalance in students' language ability in reading and writing. Although many language scholars recognize that many language tests focus on only one or a few areas of language knowledge due to practicability and cost saving, they see a need to be aware of the full range of components of language ability in designing and developing language tests and interpreting language test scores (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

As we know, what appears in the written entrance exam attracts the most interest from the teachers and students and inevitably dominates the curriculum. Teachers not only need to know the knowledge pertaining to the nature of responsibilities in classroom management, (such as skills to deal with parents and students), they must also have an ethical compass in mind because Chinese students follow the rules strictly as they are taught and do not, usually, question the rigidity and insufficiency of the prescribed grammar rules. In order to improve students' communicative competence, it is imperative that teachers develop alternative ways to assess students' learning performance from multiple dimensions, such as a student's portfolio or group project instead of the multiple choice questions. As with the newest version of TOEFL iBT, the speaking section is added to make sure students have no problems communicating orally. Effective teaching instruction must occur according to the needs and capabilities of individual students. The design of content standards for our discipline requires that the profession articulate its best judgment for what students should know and be able to do as a result of their study of world languages.

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APPENDIX 1

Areas of Language Knowledge by Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68

Organizational Knowledge		Pragmatic Knowledge	
Grammatical Knowledge	Textual Knowledge	Functional Knowledge	Sociolinguistic Knowledge
Knowledge of Vocabulary; Syntax; Phonology Expressions.	Knowledge of Cohesion; Rhetoric; Conversational.	Knowledge of Ideational; Manipulative ; Heuristic ; Imaginative.	Knowledge of Dialects/Varieties; Registers ; Natural or Idiomatic; Cultural references; Figures of speech.