

An Evaluation on Primary English Education in Taiwan: From the Perspective of Language Policy

Ai-hua Chen¹

¹Center for General Education, Asia-Pacific Institute of Creativity, Taiwan

Correspondence: Ai-hua Chen, Asia-Pacific Institute of Creativity, Taiwan. E-mail: aihua@ms.apic.edu.tw

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Abstract

There is a growing tendency in Asia for English as a foreign / second (EFL/ESL) programs to be implemented in the early years of primary schooling. Government policies supporting teaching primary school English are often framed in terms of globalization and the need to compete with other Asian neighbors. In the case of Taiwan, this notion increasingly has led government to support primary school English teaching curricula for all students and to parents spending large sums of money on private tutoring or out of school tuition. Arguments for this position are often based on the “earlier is better” ESL evidence, rather than on sound language policy settings and EFL research. As a consequence, problems and controversies have arisen related to inconsistencies that exist between the macro- and micro-level implementation forces. The purpose of this study is to explore these implementation issues and problems from a language planning and policy perspective through an examination of the language-in-education policy types required for the development of successful programs. This study concludes with some implications for the possible reforms of primary EFL education policy that aim to improve implementation in order to better serve the EFL learning needs of students in Taiwan.

Keywords: primary English education, English language policy

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of 21st century, Taiwan has been undergoing a political and economic transformation with the aim of upgrading its international competitiveness. Evidence for this can be found in the government’s active participation in various international organizations like the Asia-Pacific Regional Operations Center and the World Trade Organization, which has led Taiwan to increased international interactions in the past decade. In turn, this has contributed to creating an increasing demand for English as the language of choice for international communication, given its current status as a global language or lingua franca (Crystal, 2003). Since English is seen as the language that provides access to the world (Government Information Office, 2002), its importance is indisputable if Taiwan is to be competitive in the international arena.

English is correlated with globalization and internationalization and thus English ability is regarded by Taiwanese government as an imperative for manpower development in Taiwan. The government’s efforts to promote citizens’ English competitiveness has fostered the belief in Taiwanese society that English is the most important medium for access to power and resources, i.e. English competitiveness has been closely linked to national economic capability in the international arena at the macro level as well as at the level of the citizens’ individual instrumental success in society at the micro level. As a result, “English fever” (Krashen, 2003) has prevailed around the country, and English learning has been regarded as a “whole nation movement” (Chern, 2002). A growing number of parents have begun sending their primary school children to private language institutions in order to give them a head start in their English language learning and thus to prepare them for higher social and economic status in the future. English competitiveness is perceived by the government and by citizens as an important requirement in workforce and for individual development. As Bruthiaux (2002) indicated, the role of English in the employment market has pushed parents in all societies to demand provision for learning and to demand that government education systems respond.

2. The Development of Primary EFL Education Policy in Taiwan

Under both the top-down pressure of globalization and the bottom-up pressure of the public’s expectations, the Ministry of Education launched a reformulation of English language-in-education policy in 2001, moving

English instruction from the secondary school level to the primary level. In addition, the implementation of the new primary English education policy has also reflected the desire to reform the system by the new government – i.e., the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which won the national election and in 2000 started a new political era after more than fifty years' rule by the Kuomintang (KMT) government.

Consequently, the English language, which has long been a subject in the secondary school curriculum, was introduced at Grade 5 in the elementary school curriculum in 2001. The Ministry of Education stated that the rationale for implementing primary English language education was to:

- 1) Instill students with an international perspective;
- 2) Utilize students' "critical period" in language learning most effectively;
- 3) Optimize the timing of the implementation of the new curriculum; and
- 4) Follow the trends of the new era and to fulfill parents' expectations (Ministry of Education, 1998; also see Tsao, 2008).

Given this rationale, it can be seen that the process of policy making was influenced by a number of forces and facets of concern, including the need for internationalization, the effectiveness of English language learning, educational reform in Taiwan, and the expectations from the public. In particular, the parental expectations that are included in the fourth rationale may suggest the important role that the community can play in education policy decision making. However, as Tsao (2008) pointed out, parental expectations in the Taiwanese context can be seen as a double-edged sword which on the one hand it might accelerate the policy-making process, and on the other hand it might also pressure the government to act too rashly.

In September 2001, at the same time as the primary English curriculum reform was initiated, the Nine-year Joint Curriculum Plan – which integrated school subjects into seven major areas of study – was launched. English was combined with Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese and other local language varieties into a curriculum area called Language Arts. The current English language education curriculum guidelines state the goals of primary EFL education as being:

- 1) To develop student's basic communicative abilities.
- 2) To cultivate students' interests as well as better ways of learning English.
- 3) To promote students' awareness of local and foreign cultures and customs (Ministry of Education, 2000).

The English education curriculum also identifies two stages of English instruction: the primary school stage, that places greater emphasis on students' oral abilities (listening and speaking), and the junior high school stage developing the reading and writing language skills in addition to the oral communication. Furthermore, primary English education is intended to prepare students for EFL learning at the junior high school level in order to comply with the goal of the Nine-year Joint Curricula (Ministry of Education, 2000). In addition, the guidelines also suggest that teaching methods should emphasize meaningful communication rather than rote memorization by providing an enjoyable English learning environment.

However, just two years later the 2001 primary English education policy was changed, lowering the point of the introduction of English education to Grade 3. Changing the policy so rashly has been criticized as a case of bad planning (Hung, 2003; Tsao, 2008). Although the government's implementation of primary English education seems to be a case of top-down policy making (Su, 2006), some researchers considered it to be the result of a bottom-up decision-making process – i.e., resulting from the pressure brought to bear by parents and local school bureaus on the government (Hung, 2003). In the decade since the implementation of primary English education in 2001, a number of persistent policy-related problems and issues have emerged as a result of these major changes.

3. Issues Concerning the Implementation of Primary EFL Education Policy

As mentioned earlier, a policy revising and accomplishing in a very short time and with high expectation from the society inevitably has its problems and draw criticism. In the following sections, five issues related to different aspects of language-in-education policy are briefly analyzed (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). They include (1) the inconsistency in starting grade levels for English education (access policy); (2) the shortage of qualified English teachers (personnel policy); (3) the divergence of textbooks being used (materials policy); (4) large classes made up of students with mixed proficiency (access policy); and (5) the effects of EFL education on the learning of other languages (curriculum policy).

3.1 Inconsistency in Starting Grade Levels of EFL Program

Since the 1987 lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan, the central and local governments have started to support a multi-faceted language policy; consequently, there has been a movement away from centralized and standardized English curricula to decentralized ones. While the adoption of a decentralized planning model in primary EFL education policy has granted more autonomy to district schools and teachers (Chern, 2002), it has caused inconsistency in access policy provisions for English education among primary schools in different districts; i.e., the starting grade levels for EFL education are different in local government districts. Although the Ministry of Education has mandated that primary EFL education should start at Grade 3, major districts such as those in the cities of Taipei, Hsinchu, Taichung and Tainan have started their EFL programs in Grade 1. As a consequence, other local governments have attempted to include the early introduction of primary English education as an important policy in their political agenda in order to attract the support of their electorates. However, the important question as to whether children are prepared for early language learning in a foreign language before they have developed literacy skills in their own language has been mostly ignored.

This expansion has in turn brought about some inequities in educational opportunities for primary school students in other districts (Chang, 2008; Chang, 2009), which may increase the concerns and anxiety levels of parents' that their children might fall behind in learning English when their children's school begins EFL education later than other schools. These parents might see enrolling their children in private institutions as a solution that gives their children a head start in learning English. In addition, inconsistencies may be created when students have had to accommodate to their parents' move from one city to another (Cheng, 2005). The variation in starting grade among different districts has led inequalities in both access and quality of access in the implementation of primary EFL policy.

3.2 The Shortage of Qualified English Teachers

Another problem related to the lowering of the grade level at which English is introduced is the increasing demand for English teachers. In Taiwan, primary English teachers have varying qualifications and levels of training. For example:

- Some English teachers were certified under a nation-wide training scheme in 1999;
- Other primary teachers who have passed the international TOFEL examination with a score of 213 or better can achieve equivalent certification; and
- Still others achieve certification by completing university-level English-related majors and receive additional training (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Despite the fact that the MOE's personnel policy has allowed multiple criteria to qualify as a primary English teacher, the nation has still encountered a shortage of qualified teachers.

In view of this, the MOE announced the initiation of the Foreign English Teacher Recruitment Project in 2003. Under the auspices of this project, contracted Native English Speaker teachers (NESTs) are expected to teach English along side Taiwanese English teachers in public primary schools, particularly in remote areas. However, due to implementation problems and ineffective results – i.e., foreign English teachers may find it problematic to stay in remote areas when they are newly arrived in the country – this project was terminated after a few years because it failed to solve the problem of the shortage of qualified English teachers.

As a result, in many district primary schools there are frequent instances of homeroom teachers or substitute teachers who lack certificates but who are teaching English. In addition, the types and amounts of in-service training available to teachers seeking certification also vary among different local boards of education. This problem is most serious in rural areas; in some cases the students are given videos to watch in their English classes since their teachers are not sufficiently confident to teach English (Cheng, 2005). As a result, there are serious problems arising from regional discrepancies in recruiting English teachers, as well as major differences in the quality and quantity of teaching resources between urban and rural schools.

Moreover, from an English teachers' perspective, for example, as indicated in Butler's (2004) study, the majority of the primary English teachers sampled in Taiwan perceived their proficiency levels to be lower than the minimum levels necessary to teach English under the current primary English education policy implying that most teachers may not feel confident or well-prepared to implement the government's policy that emphasizes communicative English instruction. Teachers' lack of confidence in their English skills may affect various aspects of their English teaching and ultimately influence students' success in acquiring English.

From a policy planning perspective, it may be easy to use policy to set aspirations for a communicative focus in

primary English education, but the government has failed to take into consideration the difficulties in the policy's actual implementation given the limited resources currently available, e.g., shortage of qualified English teachers to conduct effective English instruction. Consequently, the policy can be said to provide an example of idealistic planning as the training and resources are not available to put it into practice, and it may therefore create misleading expectations for the public about the quality of English language teaching.

3.3 Divergence of Textbooks

A third major issue in the current primary EFL program is related to materials policy and to the openness of the textbook market. Textbooks are developed by various private publishers and then reviewed by the National Institute of Compilation and Translation. Primary English teachers are allowed to choose from among the textbooks approved by the National Institute. However, it is often the case that different sets of textbooks are used at different primary schools or even at different grade levels in the same school. Although many of these textbooks were developed following the new English curriculum guidelines and approved by the Ministry of Education, there is very little compatibility among these different textbooks (Chang, 2004). As a result, there is content inconsistency from one school to another and discontinuity from one grade level to another; such differences have created curriculum continuity problems for teachers and students (Liaw, 2009).

This materials policy also raises the question of who should be involved and what expertise they bring to textbook evaluation. Community involvement might lead to decisions based on power relationships rather than on professional criteria. However, many teachers or administrators have no training on which to base the selection of an appropriate textbook and might be influenced in their choice by materials from well-known publishers. In both cases, suitable texts might not be selected. Therefore, there is an urgent need to provide the skills of textbook evaluation in teachers' professional training.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is that the curriculum-related guidelines for textbook content provided by the MOE may not be specific enough. As a result, the content of textbooks varies dramatically across the wide range of approved textbooks available on the market (Chang, 2004). Hence, it is suggested that there should be additional guidelines that provide more specific learning goals and that content at each grade level should be also systematically stipulated so as to ensure there is sequential and systematic progress in EFL learning.

3.4 Large Classes of Students with Mixed Proficiency

The Ministry of Education changed its access policy and lowered the introduction of EFL programs to Grade 3 with the aim of ensuring equal educational opportunities for all children. However, the new approach has had very little effect in decreasing the number of students attending private institutions. On the contrary, the number of younger children enrolling in bilingual kindergartens has increased (Chen, 2003) despite a governmental ban on such programs. This policy banning such programs has not been effective in regulating the age at which students start to learn English (Chang, 2008); rather the policy has simply augmented the anxieties that parents have, creating a rush to start their children's learning of English language at an earlier age. As a result, teachers have reported that a large number of their students have learned English outside of school. Thus, some children have started studying English in kindergarten, in Grade 1 or in Grade 2, while some neophyte learners, most of whom come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have only just begun to learn the alphabet through their formal schooling in Grade 3 (Su, 2006). This problem has in turn created difficulties for teachers when dealing with large classes of students with quite varied levels of proficiency in learning English. The gap between some students' proficiency levels and its relationship to their socio-economic backgrounds and their ability to access additional English instruction has also become even more obvious.

In view of the large gap in students' proficiency levels among students in the same class, a growing number of teachers and parents are arguing for the streaming of students by proficiency levels to bring about more effective teaching and learning (Crawford, 2003). However, it should be noted that such heterogeneous levels in the same class were mainly the result of differences in children's socio-economic backgrounds. While some students of high socio-economic families have learned English for years before formal primary English begins, many children from low socio-economic families may not have had that opportunity. Those who start learning English later are not necessarily slower learners than their counterparts. Therefore, entry level English proficiency testing has the potential to lead to inappropriate placement that could negatively affect students' motivation for, and interest in, learning English and, in turn, hinder their progress and EFL performance.

This observation suggests that teachers need to incorporate effective teaching strategies such as cooperative learning to deal with mixed-level classes in order to provide students with different levels of support and challenges in their learning. More EFL teaching strategies in relation to mixed-level teaching (Bowler &

Parminter, 2002) should be systematically provided by the government in regular teacher training programs to help teachers to deal effectively with mixed-level classes. In addition, there is also an urgent need to take some measures to assist students – e.g., providing free after-school programs for lower-achieving EFL students, as well as setting up English clubs for higher-achieving EFL students to allow them to enhance their English proficiency.

3.5 The Threat to Other Languages

The overemphasis on the global status of English combined with the widespread obsession with English across nation seem to pose a threat to the learning of the official language Mandarin Chinese as well as to other government policies intended to promote the learning of local languages.

First, the introduction of English in primary schools has meant a change in curriculum policy since two 40-minute periods of EFL instruction have been incorporated into the official curriculum, decreasing the amount of time allocated to Mandarin Chinese instruction. In addition, since the two languages have completely different grammatical and phonological structures, and writing systems, when combined with less instructional time, EFL learning at the primary level may have negative effects on children's full and effective development of Mandarin competence, and some children may fail to develop the competence required in either language (Hung, 2004).

Second, in addition to the EFL education policy developed in response to the challenge of internationalization, the Taiwanese government also has stipulated localization, i.e., the introduction of local language-in-education policy at the primary school level. The introduction of local language education policy has been regarded as a remarkable movement against the strict imposition of the Mandarin Policy of the past (Chen, 2003), and has encouraged bilingualism or multiculturalism in the country. However, when it is compared with the English education policy, it is often the case that the government, the school administrators and the general public have exhibited a strong bias in favor of using the current limited resources available to support English education policy (Chen, 2003, Tsao, 2008). For example, although the current primary school curriculum has a subject called "Homeland Studies" that introduces local dialects and cultures, it only is taught for one 40-minute period per week. There are only a very limited number of qualified teachers, and the teaching materials and facilities available are far less adequate than the resources available for the teaching of English. Consequently, most students and parents pay very little attention to Homeland Studies (Crawford, 2003; Su, 2006). In this climate there is a struggle for Taiwanese local languages and cultures to be seen as a priority by the public, and therefore the influence of the language policy is undermined. Crystal (2000), among others, has argued that the global spread of English might have a negative impact on other language instruction and might lead to the demise of minority languages. In Taiwan a number of researchers and educators (Liao, 2004; Liu, 2004; Su, 2006) also have raised concerns about the impact of primary EFL education marginalizing Taiwanese local languages, cultures or even Chinese identities (See, e.g., Chen, 2003).

The effects of primary EFL education continue to create debate and controversy in the country. Nevertheless, an over emphasis on English education affects curriculum design and the distribution of resources, so care is needed if Taiwanese languages are not to be marginalized.

4. The Interplay of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Pressures

As discussed earlier, the problems and controversies emerged from the primary EFL education policy have also been manifested due to the inconsistency between the two confronting language implementation forces at the macro and micro level. While there are strong top-down globalization/internationalization pressures on governments for the advancement of economic competition in the global market, at the same time there is also a strong bottom-up pressure from parents nationally on governments for their children to learn English from an earlier age. The political, sociocultural and economic context of Taiwan combined with different societal forces resulted in the hasty implementation of English language education at the primary level, and consequently caused profound impacts on the education system and many problems needed to be solved.

From the perspective of national macro language planning, primary English education in Taiwan can be regarded as a top-down policy emanating from global-structural pressures and as a response to, and solution for, the bottom-up internal pressures of public expectations. In addition, the new government's (DDP) enthusiasm and ambition, at the time it came to power in 1990, to reform education also partly accelerated the policy of primary English education. However, a policy of acting too quickly with too high expectations from the society and without adequate research-based planning inevitably leads to problems and draws criticism (Crombie, 2006) as the case of Taiwanese primary English education policy illustrates. As a result, a growing number of disparities and controversial issues have been emerged, to some extent the primary English education policy has led to the waste of valuable resources and is an example of unrealistic planning.

From the community's micro level perspective, derived from the nationwide stress on the importance of English for global and individual success, Taiwanese parents perceived their children's learning of English from a much more ideological orientation than from a pragmatic one. They insisted on their children to learn English from an earlier age because of perceived social and economic benefits, for example, as a symbol of better life, or as providing increased social mobility and enhanced status. While positive parental support for the language planning process plays a critical role in the success of the language planning (Breen, 2002), too much pressure and too high expectations from Taiwanese parents can be an obstacle to good primary English language planning (Su, 2006). Furthermore, these signs of parents' overemphasis on their children's English education also imply their worries and insecurities that derive from the government's stress on international competitiveness, and this in turn has caused parents put even greater pressure on the government for the reform of English education in Taiwan.

Taiwanese primary English education policy is currently an inter-tangling of both top-down and bottom up policy-making issues. While there emerged critical problems and controversies due to the lack of collaboration and communication between policy implementation levels, the range of challenges indicated in the previous sections seems to suggest that an effective combination of both top-down and bottom-up procedures is necessary if such a large-scale educational change is to become fully embedded within a national system.

5. Conclusion

Having brought together the controversial issues caused by primary English-in-education policy and how top-down and bottom-up forces have influenced the formation of such policy in Taiwan, it is noted there remains a lot of challenges for all policy implementation levels to work on. The results of this study indicate that there are concerns that the Taiwanese government needs to re-examine in the area of primary English education policy and related curricular initiatives.

First, the most critical challenges that the primary English education policy faces relate to issues of equity and growing diversity. As pointed out earlier, substantial diversity in access policy, personnel policy, materials policy and resource availability across the local districts raises the issue of unequal access to primary English education in the public school system. The disparities in the equality of EFL instruction are partially due to the lack of sufficient professional guidance for teachers and local administrators and also partly due to local governments' financial abilities. While it sounds democratic to adopt a decentralized model in the planning of primary English-in-education, it is imperative to assure equal access to educational services for all children in Taiwan regardless of their place of residence, socio-economic background, or linguistic background. Hence, it is suggested that some regulations are required to complement this decentralized model.

The MOE needs to secure a certain level of uniformity in the quality of primary English education across regions and a level of consistency in practice over time, and thus it needs to provide both financial and other support to local governments and schools that need assistance in this regard.

Next, the debate and conflict between internationalization and localization within Taiwanese society continues. The government should make an effort to ensure that there is a balance in developing the two perspectives within communities. Educators of young children in particular play a central role in shaping these concepts for their students. The development of primary English education at the expense of other cultures, languages, skills, and qualities of Taiwanese students is highly undesirable.

Finally, although government's English-in-education language planning sounds well-intended and is well-stated with clear goals, it has failed to look thoroughly at the micro level planning processes required for successful implementation. As a result, inconsistencies and controversies have emerged in macro to micro translation processes, and in turn there have been negative impacts on educational equality that have been criticized in various micro level situations. Therefore, constant collaboration and communication among all policy levels in policy implementation are urgently required for a successful primary English-in-education policy to be achieved. It is suggested that the government should develop a clear process of public participation and consultation at all levels in the planning of educational and language policies, prior to the implementation of such reforms through the education process.

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