

# The First Decade of Elementary School EFL Education in Taiwan: Policy Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation provides an overview of the development of English language education in elementary schools in Taiwan. In addition to describing the challenges when first implementing the *Grade 1-9 English Curriculum Guides*, findings from a nation-wide survey and in-depth interviews are also reported to reveal elementary school English teachers' perceptions of the most important policies related to English language teaching in elementary schools and their implementation effectiveness. Based on English teachers' responses, the pros and cons of the policies on instructional pedagogy, teacher education, learning divide, and student assessment are then discussed.

**Keywords:** elementary school English in Taiwan, EFL, foreign language policy

## Introduction

It has been almost a decade since the beginning of introducing English language instruction to elementary school students in Taiwan. At the initial implementation phase, there occurred its share of controversies and difficulties. Even so, the teaching of English to children in Taiwan has been moving on steadily, extending to children who are as young as first graders. The main goal of this paper is to provide an overview of the development of English language teaching in elementary schools in Taiwan. Based on a nation-wide survey conducted by this research, some major issues and problems will be discussed.

## The genesis of English language teaching in elementary schools in Taiwan

Historically, English has been taught in Taiwanese junior high schools and onwards as one of the subjects, generally for six hours per week (Zhang, 1992). The English curricula underwent some major revisions both before and after the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education system in 1968 (Chern, 2002). The curriculum standards mandated prior to 1968 followed the grammar translation method whereas the one mandated in 1971 focused on all four language skills but with reading and writing emphasized more than listening and speaking (Shih; 1998). English instruction then aimed at helping students pass entrance examinations to senior high schools and universities (Su, 2000). The recent development in the teaching of English, however, has been to overcome the challenges of globalization and internationalization. As English becomes *lingua franca*, the government of Taiwan, like many countries throughout the world, sees English as a basic educational requirement for all rather than simply as a desirable accomplishment for some (Huang, 2003). Efforts in reforming and liberalizing its education system have been ongoing and a significant aspect of the reform of education is the introduction of the *Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guides* in which English, together with Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese and other local dialects, is

stipulated as one of the subjects in the area of Language Arts. Starting in 2001, English became a subject for fifth and sixth graders in the elementary school. In 2005, English instruction was further extended to the third grade.

### **Grade 1-9 English Curriculum Guides**

The *Grade 1-9 Curriculum guides* as a whole aim at: a) cultivating students' English ability for authentic communication; b) fostering students' interest in and strategies for learning English; c) promoting students' understanding of local and foreign cultures and respect for cultural differences. In a nutshell, the English curriculum guides possess the following major characteristics: adopting the communicative approach for language instruction, using phonics to develop students' reading skills, emphasizing diversified topics and genres for writing and compiling instructional materials, and utilizing alternative methods to assess student achievements (Yeh & Shih, 2000). The curriculum guides acknowledge the nature of language development for young learners, emphasize meaningful and contextualized language learning, and "point to a direction departing from a traditional structure-based language teaching approach for teenagers (Chern, 2002, p. 102)."

In Taiwan there are 40 weeks in a school year and one class period lasts for 40 minutes. Under the new curriculum guides, elementary school students study English for one or two periods a week. Thus, students can have up to 3,200 minutes (approximately 53.3 hours) of English instruction per school year. As for textbooks and instructional materials, instead of adopting standardized texts, schools are required to set up panels responsible for translating the curriculum guides into school-based curricula and then selecting textbooks and designing materials accordingly. Textbooks are now developed by private publishers and reviewed by the National Institute of Compilation and Translation.

### **Initial difficulties when implementing the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guides**

Challenges emerged when the implementation of English in elementary schools was launched. First, though the Ministry of Education stipulated the implementation of English from third grade onward, such mandates, have not been strictly followed by all elementary schools around the nation. Some affluent cities, for example, Taipei and Tainan, started English instruction from as early as the first grade; Taichung started from the second grade. This not only caused inequity in education but also created problems for students who moved from one city to another. Textbook availability was also a problem since the National Institute of Compilation and Translation only reviews and approves those written for third-graders and older learners.

The implementation of an English curriculum in elementary schools has created a huge demand for qualified elementary school English teachers, thus placing more importance than ever on the issues related to teacher education (Her, 2007). In addition, because the implementation timelines were short, teacher training was not sufficient or thorough in either preparing teachers in pedagogy or communicative language skills.

Another difficulty was the selection of textbooks and instructional materials. Since standardized textbooks were the only ones used before, compiling textbooks and teaching materials is a new task for publishers just like selecting them is to teachers. How textbook

writers and teachers were to work together to provide the kind of materials that adhered to the new curriculum guides and at the same time met the diverse needs and English language proficiency levels of students was an unprecedented challenge (Chern, 1999; Liaw, 1999)!

### **Recent findings from a nation-wide survey of elementary school English teachers**

Despite difficulties and controversies, teaching English to elementary school children in Taiwan has been ongoing for almost a decade. During this time, tremendous efforts and resources have been poured in to ensure the effectiveness of implementation. In 2008, this researcher, sponsored by the National Science Council, R.O.C., conducted a nation-wide survey investigating elementary school English teachers' perceptions of and responses to the policies related to elementary school English instruction. Since teachers, as implementers, are the most important players, their views could provide invaluable insights into this very complicated matter (Wang, 2008). The survey was randomly sent to elementary schools in the different parts of the island for English teachers to fill out. Of the total 755 copies of questionnaire sent out, 492 copies (65%) were returned. 392 respondents were female and 85 were male. The respondents identified the top sixteen policies that have had the most impact on the teaching of English in elementary schools and expressed their responses to these policies via filling out a five-point Likert scale scheme. These sixteen policies were then grouped into four categories: pre- and in-service teacher training, instructional methods and materials, narrowing the English learning divide between urban and rural areas, and student assessments. Of the four categories, policies related to pedagogical issues received the highest satisfactory responses from teachers; policies related to student assessment were the least satisfactory. Nevertheless, all four categories received only moderate or slightly less than satisfactory responses (see Table 1).

To further understand the reasons behind the responses, in-depth interviews with 21 English teachers around the country (Northern Taiwan- 9, Central Taiwan- 5, Southern Taiwan- 4, Eastern Taiwan- 3), were also carried out.

**[Table 1] Responses to the four categories of English education policies in Taiwan**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Instructional methods and materials	3.1813	0.9884
Pre- and in-service teacher training	3.1792	1.0093
Narrowing the English learning divide between urban and rural areas	3.0070	1.0538
Student assessments	2.7985	1.2163

Responses to the policies related to pedagogical issues are listed in Table 2. Of the six policies, employing phonics instructions had the most positive responses from teachers. Teaching with the communicative approach was well received by teachers. Extending English language education to third graders, contradicting earlier concerns voiced by scholars (Lo, 2006), also had approval from English teachers. Teachers seemed to have the most doubts regarding choosing their own textbooks from those provided by private publishers. In the interviews, teachers expressed that phonics instruction was easy to integrate with communicative teaching; they could easily design game-like phonics activities to motivate their students to learn and students were thus willing to take risks when reading and using new words.

The responses to the policies related to pre- and in-service teacher training (Table 3) are all positive. Among the three, setting up central and local teacher support and supervision committees has the most positive response. The teachers being interviewed felt that they could learn very creative teaching ideas from workshops and seminars held by the committees. A committee also serves as a bridge between them and the Ministry of Education. It is interesting to note that recruiting English teachers from diverse channels (as opposed to from only teacher training institutes) had the lowest approval rating among the four policies. Among the teachers being interviewed, most of them were actually recruited from non-traditional teacher education channels. While most of them felt that it was a necessary measure when elementary school English instruction was first launched and there was a server shortage of teachers, they also had concerns about the quality of teachers who did not go through sufficient pre-service training and later did not take part in proper in-service professional development programs. Thus, they regarded the stipulating of national English language proficiency requirements for English teachers an imperative safeguard for teacher quality.

**[Table 2] Responses to the policies related to pedagogical issues**

<b>Policies</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Extending English instruction to all third graders	3.3133	0.9904
Allotting 1-3 hours per week for English instruction	3.1021	0.9802
Teaching with the communicative approach	3.2336	0.9514
Abandonment of a unified set of textbooks	3.0119	1.0747
Stipulating one thousand basic vocabulary and two thousand applied vocabulary word lists	3.1062	0.9845
Employing phonics instruction	3.3209	0.9491
Total mean	3.1813	0.9884

**[Table 3] Responses to the policies related to pre- and in-service teacher training**

<b>Policy</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Diverse channels for English teacher preparations and recruitment	3.1128	1.0320
Setting up central and local teacher support and supervision committees	3.2158	1.0071
Stipulating English language proficiency requirements for English teachers (achieving TOEFL score of 213 or GEPT intermediate high)	3.2089	0.9889
Total mean	3.1792	1.0093

Policies related to narrowing the English learning divide between urban and rural areas, however, did not all receive positive responses from English teachers, especially the policy on recruiting native English-speaking teachers from overseas. They considered it too costly and unfair to local English teachers. In addition, they expressed that children in rural schools usually have lower English language proficiency and are easily intimidated by having to communicate with native-speaker English teachers. Native English-speaking teachers who have never had any prior experience living and teaching in rural Taiwan could also be frustrated by cultural differences and communication barriers.

**Table 4] Responses to the policies related to narrowing the English learning divide between schools in urban and rural areas**

<b>Policy</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
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Co-hiring of substitute teachers	2.8759	1.0590
Recruiting Native English-speaking teachers from overseas	2.8143	1.0348
Implementing remedial English programs for slower learners	2.9419	1.0816
Creating English language learning environments on campus	3.3958	1.0399
Total mean	3.0070	1.0538

The policy on implementing remedial programs for slower learners was negatively perceived by the respondents. The interview findings reveal that it was due to difficulties to find time to give special attention or extra instruction to slower learners. Teachers hope to have human resources from local communities (for example, parents, volunteers, or student teachers) to provide the service, instead of having them take up the remedial workload themselves. The policy stipulating that the setting up of campuses to facilitate English language learning basically means that both central and local governments provide resources to schools (including money, audio-visual equipments, books, and classrooms specifically for English teaching, etc.) and of course the policy was most welcomed by the teachers.

Policies related to student assessment all received negative responses except using alternative ways to assess students' performances. The policy of conducting nation-wide Taiwan Assessments of Student Achievement (TASA) is for the Ministry of Education to understand the academic achievements of students in the different regions of the country. Each year, the National Education Research Institute selects fourth graders, second year junior high schools students, and second year senior high school students in the different parts of the country to take a paper-pencil type of achievement test. The results of the individual students or schools are not announced as the assessments are mainly to establish a nation-wide data bank and for research purposes only. Quite a few teachers were unclear about the purpose of the assessments and therefore did not respond to the policy positively; some even regarded it as contradictory to the communicative approach of language instruction. Nevertheless, those who supported TASA expressed that TASA scores could provide a comprehensive profile of how students are performing regionally and nationally and could be a reference to the MOE when appropriating budgets to local education departments for remedial programs. As for the policy for local education departments to implement their own student assessment, most respondents did not support the policy feeling that it was unnecessary.

Different from the responses to standardized TASA and local-TASA, teachers thought that the adoption of alternative methods, such as portfolios, gaming, role plays, drama performances, etc., could better reflect students' communicative competencies as well as language growth and would be less likely to jeopardize younger students' enthusiasm for learning. The weakness of conducting alternative assessments, however, was being time-consuming and unrealistic when facing larger classes.

**[Table 5] Responses to the policies related to student assessments**

<b>Policy</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Alternative assessments	3.1239	0.9875
Implementing Taiwan Assessment of Student Achievement-English	2.7334	1.0752
Local governments implementing their own student assessment	2.5381	1.0922
Total mean	2.7985	1.2163

## Conclusions

Due to globalization, English has become the ubiquitous international language (Crystal, 2000). In response to the growing need for English proficiency, Taiwan has embraced substantial changes in its English language education. Similar to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Korea and Japan, Taiwan now has English language education at the elementary school level, with particular emphasis on developing communication skills (Butler, 2004, Kam, 2002; Nunan, 2003). Many challenges occurred during the first decade of implementation. However, according to the national survey conducted by this researcher, most of the policies have been positively perceived by teachers, especially those that provide guidelines for pedagogical practices. The fact that communicative teaching and phonics instruction are welcomed by teachers indicates that elementary school English teachers are not bound by the traditional structured-based teaching, and policies do have an impact on the instructional approaches adopted by teachers. Although extending English teaching to lower grade levels was initially a controversy, the objections have now subsided. The new debatable topic is whether English should be taught in kindergartens or not (Oladejo, 2006). Inadequate pre- and in-service teacher education and the widespread use of non-qualified teachers were the most worrisome issues when elementary school English teaching was first launched (Nunan, 2003). With provisions of teacher support and supervision as well as setting up national standards, hopefully the problem can be minimized. Most of the policies on narrowing the learning divide between urban and rural areas have not reached their intended goals and should be reviewed and revised. Approaches other than bringing in native English-speaking teachers and asking teachers to take on extra workloads by teaching slower learners will need to be sought. The objectives of conducting national and local assessments of students' English learning achievement have not been fully explained to English teachers and therefore caused concerns that this would inadvertently force teachers to fall back to the old teach-to-the-test approach. Better communication with teachers, administrators, and parents has to be employed to achieve the intended goals.

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#### **About the Presenter**

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