

English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level in Taiwan: EFL teachers' perspectives

Ya-Chen Su, Professor

Department of Applied English, Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Tainan, Taiwan

Author Email: yasandy2002@yahoo.com



Author

Ya-Chen Su, Professor

Department of Applied English,
Southern Taiwan University of
Science and Technology, Tainan,
Taiwan

*Corresponding Author Email:
yasandy2002@yahoo.com

Abstract

The demand for innovative EFL curriculum at the elementary level has become a global issue. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Taiwan's elementary EFL teachers perceive the factors affecting students' EFL learning and how they respond to and implement the current English policy of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level. Twenty-three elementary English teachers in Tainan districts agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected through teachers' interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. Results found that all 23 agreed that multiple factors, such as formal instruction, class size, sufficient teaching hours, students' attitudes and motivation, and learning environment in and outside of class toward English learning affect contribute the success of EFL teaching. Results also found that instead of drilling and skill practice, they tried to modify traditional activities by combining them with communicative activities to help students learn the alphabet, phonics, grammar points, and vocabulary.

Keywords: policy implementation, EFL learning, language planning

Introduction

Due in large part to the trends toward economic globalization, English has become the most widely disseminated and ubiquitous international language. As Crystal (2000) states, English has increasingly become the international language for business and commerce, science and technology, Internet, entertainment, and even sports. In response to the growing needs for appropriate English communication in EFL courses, various countries, including many East Asian countries, have introduced a number of substantial changes in their English language educational policies. For example, countries such as Korea, Taiwan, and Japan have begun to introduce English language education at the elementary school level (Butler, 2004).

In Taiwan's case, due to the fact that English plays such an important role in international business, communication, technology, education and travel, the

government has placed the teaching and learning of English high on its agenda. Thus, improving the population's English competency is seen as a key component in the government's campaign to transform Taiwan into an international business center. Students who learn English as a second language will be able to participate in international affairs and join international organizations (Chen, 1999). To that end, the government published a series of language policies and school curricula regarding English learning. English instruction began in secondary schools in 1949 with students studying English six hours per week (Zhang, 1992). In 1998 the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that English instruction would move from senior high schools to elementary schools starting in 2001, based on research that confirms children learn languages best at a young age. Although the MOE claimed that the English curriculum would begin at grade 3, local educational bureaus and schools could designate a lower starting

grade-level. For example, Tainan City and its suburban areas started English instruction in the second grade and moved to the first grade in 2002. In the same year (2002) Taipei City put English instruction in the first grade's curriculum.

Because the Taiwanese government and Eastern Asian countries have put much emphasis on the English language policy at the elementary level, it is significant to examine how practitioners perceive the top-down policy and its affect on classroom instruction (Wang, 2002).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand how elementary EFL teachers perceive the factors affecting students' EFL learning and how they respond to and implement the current English language policy.

Three research questions are addressed:

1. What do teachers believe about learning English at an early age?
2. How do teachers perceive the policy of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level?
3. How are EFL lessons developed?

Theoretical Framework

Age has been considered a major factor determining success in learning a second (L2) and foreign language (FL). Many countries in eastern Asia (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand) have recently taken steps to introduce the teaching of English to students in schools at an earlier age or grade level. Children are considered capable of acquiring a new language more rapidly than adults. The idea of the critical period for language acquisition was first proposed by Penfield and Roberts in 1959 and later supported by Lenneberg (1967). They determined that the differences between an adult's and child's brain have a powerful influence on the capacity for language acquisition. Language proficiency declines as the age of initial exposure to the second language increases. As Penfield and Roberts stated, language acquisition is most efficient before age 9, when "the human brain becomes. . . stiff and rigid" (p.256). Since Penfield and Roberts, researchers have variously claimed that the age at which the critical period terminates is 5 years (Krashen, 1973), 6 years (Pinker, 1994), or 12 years (Lenneberg, 1967). According to Marnova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow (2000), the term *critical period* for language acquisition refers to a period of time when learning a language is relatively easy and typically meets with a high degree of success. Once the period is over, at or before the onset of puberty, the average learner is less likely to achieve the proficiency level of a native speaker in the target language.

On the other hand, a number of studies, such as Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), Singleton (1995; 1989), Nunn (1999), and Marnova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow (2000) have demonstrated that the claim that "earlier is better" for language learning has no empirical evidence to support it. Marnov-Todd, Marshall, & Snow (2000) in their study illustrate three misconceptions about age and L2 learning: (1) Most people have misinterpreted the ultimate

proficiency of children in an L2 as proof that they learn easily and quickly. (2) Neuroscientists have often committed an error of misattribution, assuming that the localization of language within the brain led to differences in proficiency and explained the poorer performance of older learners. (3) A number of studies and an abundance of anecdotal evidence have shown that many adults do have significant problems in learning another language. These studies led to the overgeneralization that all adults are incapable of mastering an L2. Marnov-Too, Marshall & Snow conclude that there is no evidence that the locations of brain activities have any significant effect on learning a second or foreign language. Instead, they indicate that children acquire new languages slowly and with less speed and more effort than adolescents or adults. Most adult learners fail in L2 acquisition because of insufficient motivation, time or energy commitment, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high levels of success.

The studies above suggest that age is not the only determining factor for successful second or foreign language learning and a well-developed curriculum. The implementation of the government's EFL curriculum policy depends on teachers. Their beliefs and attitudes have a greater influence on their instruction and decision-making.

Methodology

Participants

23 teachers (21 females and 2 males) agreed to participate in this study. They represented twenty-three public schools in Tainan city and its surrounding suburbs. Participants were all born and raised in Taiwan and spoke Mandarin as their first language. Three teachers had less than 2-year experience of teaching English and the rest had taught English for 3-12 years. All twenty-three teachers completed the two-year intensive Elementary English Teacher Training Program (EETTP), where candidates spend the first year taking intensive training courses (e.g. general education courses, and TEFOL methodology courses) and the second year serving as interns in elementary schools. Most of the participating teachers majored in English and education as undergraduates. Five teachers hold a Master's Degree in English in Taiwan (3) and the United States (2).

Data Collection

Data collection included scheduled interviews, classroom observation at different grade level, and relevant document analysis. First, One semi-structured interviews were scheduled. It was conduct in the middle and the end of this study. The interviews lasted 1-2 hours each. The purposes of interviews were introduced. After gaining participants' permission, all interviews were tape-recorded. Their responses were assured for anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English.

Second, classroom observations followed the interviews. The researcher recorded the progression and procedures of each lesson. Each observation lasted 90 minutes. The final data source was a document analysis

of lesson plans, texts being studied, and handouts to investigate the teachers' teaching topics, content, and procedures.

Data Analysis

Data were sorted, organized, and analyzed into three parts based on three research questions: (1) teachers' general beliefs about L2 learning; (2) teachers' response to the English language policy; and (3) classroom planning. The data (e.g., field notes from observation, transcriptions of interviews, document analysis) were reread many times. Key words were annotated in the margins of the filed notes and transcription. These annotations were categorized, resulting in themes.

Results

Results from the current study offer a framework for understanding (1) teachers' beliefs about age and foreign language acquisition; (2) teachers' perceptions of the positive and negative effects of the EFL policy on students' language; and (3) classroom practices and planning.

Teachers' Beliefs about Age and Foreign Language Acquisition

Eight out of twenty-three teachers thought that it is important to have an early start in learning English because age affects language learning, especially in phonological development:

Teacher 8: According to my personal FL learning experiences in secondary school, I regretted that I did not learn English at an earlier age. I found that it was difficult for me to pronounce some vowels correctly, such as /v/, /l/, and /θ/. I also found myself having a strong (foreign) accent. On the other hand, my students have no difficulty sounding them out. Their accents and pronunciation are more like a native-speaker than mine (Interview 1).

When asked what the appropriate age for learning FL is, eight teachers all agreed with age 5 or earlier. They repeatedly mentioned that students who learn a language early improve their chances for native-like pronunciation and a high level of proficiency later on. As Teacher 6 explained:

First, the long years of experiences in English learning can lead to a significant decrease in degree of foreign accent. Second, young children are less afraid of learning English and making mistakes in public. . . . They have high levels of curiosity about imitating and performing in public (Interview 1).

Fifteen teachers disagreed with an early start of learning English. Seven teachers indicated that English language instruction might detract from students' progress in native language or first language (Mandarin and Taiwanese local dialects) learning in and out of the classrooms:

Teacher 5: Since grade 1, students are already required to learn two languages: Mandarin and a Taiwanese local dialect (Fukien or Hakkas language). If they are required to study English, they have to learn three languages at the same time. I do not think that it is a good idea. First, students cannot fully concentrate on each language. Second, these languages have separate linguistic systems, so young children might feel confused and mix up these three languages easily. These three languages should be kept apart and learned at different grade levels (Interview 1).

Teacher 5 further suggested that English learning should be postponed until children develop and strengthen L1 competence. In that way, "their native language would be interfere as little as possible with their attempt to acquire English" (Interview 1).

Besides the concern of the L1 learning progress, eight of fifteen teachers asserted that FL learning will increase the learning load and parental pressure imposed on young children:

Teacher 2: At school students have to learn a lot of core subjects: languages, science, math and social studies. After classes they have to go to cram schools to study English, computer, math, and so on. They have little leisure time to do anything they want (Interview 2).

Teacher 8: Most parents have high expectations of their children about English learning. They want them to achieve the highest English grade they can. They believe that that the higher grades their children receive, the higher English proficiency they have. This often causes a lot of learning stress for children (Interview 2).

When asked whether the age is the major factor of affecting successful English learning, eight teachers agreed and the remaining fifteen disagreed. These fifteen teachers all claimed that age is one of the factors, but not the major one. However, all twenty-three teachers agreed that other factors also affect FL acquisition process. Such factors as formal instruction, class size, sufficient teaching hours, students' attitudes and motivation, learning environment in and outside of class, and language anxiety were brought up and discussed by all of

the twenty-three teachers, for example:

Teacher 2: When it comes to examining the effect of FL learning, teachers and their instruction play an important role. Teachers' lesson developments involve such components as authentic and interesting activities (e.g. songs, game, storytelling, rhyme) and text materials (e.g., picture books), which allow students to imitate, perform, and have fun (Interview 2).

Teacher 7: Besides the age-appropriate instruction and text materials, we need to consider whether the instructional time is adequate and class size is small enough. The more time children are exposed to English learning, the higher their proficiency level will be. . . . If class size is small, we can make sure each student is on track (Interview 2).

Teacher 10: If students have a supportive learning environment outside of school, they have many chances to practice English outside of class, which can reinforce what they have learned in class. On the other hand, if the classroom is the only place where students learn English, they do not have many opportunities to practice English (Interview 2).

Teachers' Perceptions of the EFL Policy on Language Learning

All twenty-three teachers agreed with the policy for English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level. The three most commonly cited reasons were that the acquisition of English (1) is a crucial part of Taiwan's development in global economy and international relations and (2) improves students for future employment, education, and travel. For example:

Teacher 5: A high level of English proficiency is still required in the Taiwanese workforce.... Most of Taiwan's businesses rely on exporting products to other countries and English is the primary means of engaging in international communication and business, so a growing number of Taiwanese companies are looking for employees who have high level of English proficiency (Interview 1).

Teacher 8: Students will be more likely to succeed in future career, travel and educational opportunities once they

learn English. In the future, a large number of them might work for international companies, travel to other countries to work, or work with people from other countries (Interview 1).

When asked about the benefits of elementary English instruction, the most common claim was that it can begin to develop students' English skills at an earlier age, enabling them to achieve a higher level of proficiency and improved academic performance. For example:

Teacher 9: Beginning foreign language study in elementary schools helps children reduce their anxiety and gain confidence in language learning later on (Interview 2).

Teacher 12: Students can develop English competency which begins to develop fluency before they enter secondary schools to continue to study English (Interview 2).

Classroom Practices and Planning

When asked about the opinions of the new curriculum guide, all 23 teachers expressed that it established different goals for English instruction than those of the traditional curriculum guide:

The traditional EFL curriculum guide stresses phonic/letter/word identification, grammar analysis and decoding, and text translation. In contrast, the new curriculum guide suggests that instruction should adopt a holistic, communicative approach. Teachers should develop lessons to help students practice intercultural communication rather than drill. The guide also stipulates that teachers should provide a natural, enjoyable, anxiety-free, cooperative, and meaningful language learning environment to help students learn English (Teacher 21, Interview 1).

When asked how they used the curriculum guide, teachers expressed that the textbook is an important tool for them to develop lessons and follow guidelines. The reasons for using the textbooks are illustrated by the following statement from Teacher 17:

First, these books I selected are on the approval list under the Ministry of Education. They can help me follow the curriculum guidelines. Second,, the private textbook companies provided sufficient teaching aids, such as teacher' manual, workbook, tests for chapter and unit review, and some additional sources, such as flash

cards, game boards, picture cards, posters, tapes, or CDs, for me to use (Interview 1).

Classroom observation and document analysis of text content and course syllabi also found that teachers relied on textbooks to design lessons and activities. Lesson developed from grades 2 to 6 follow the objectives of the government's curriculum guidelines, progressing in sequential order from phonological (e.g. pronunciation) and orthographic development (e.g., letter/word recognition, spelling, and phonemic awareness) to syntax (e.g. grammatical structure/rules) and semantic development (e.g., reading comprehension), moving from listening and speaking to reading and writing.

Based on teachers' interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis, the teaching procedures and activities teachers frequently used at each grade level are outlined in the following list:

Grades 1-2: (1) Authentic activities: focused on listening and speaking, concentrating on such authentic activities such as songs, rhymes, games, as well as interactive use of flash cards and objects. (2) Alphabet activities: used to help students identify and pronounce upper and lowercase letters. (3) Conversation activities: provided simple scripted dialogues to learn basic language patterns for real-life communication.

Grade 3:(1) Alphabet activities: continued to teach students the alphabet, concentrating on correct identification, pronunciation, decoding, and upper- and lowercase printing of each letter using traditional activities (e.g. drill practice, read aloud) and authentic activities (e.g., songs, games, and rhymes). (2) Phonic activities: taught phonics (constants and long vowels) and helped students understand that each letter represents one sound. (3) Conversation and reading activities: continued to use a simple real-life story or some conversational dialogue to help practice basic language patterns and recognize key vocabulary terms. Communicative activities (e.g., role play) were provided.

Grade 4 : (1) Alphabet activities: reviewed alphabet to make sure that children can correctly identify and print each uppercase and lowercase letter using traditional activities (e.g., drill practice, copying letters) and authentic activities (e.g., songs, or rhymes). (2) Phonic activities: continued to teach phonic rules. Also encouraged students themselves to sound out the words and figure out the spelling rules by themselves. (3) Reading activities: read some stories with illustrations and controlled vocabulary. Used these materials and pictures to do role-play, storytelling, and paired conversation as well as help students identify some grammatical points (e.g. 5-Questions, capitalization and punctuation); (4) Vocabulary activities: taught students vocabulary using the

text and such activities as fill-in-the blank exercises, storytelling, and picture-and-word matching. Teachers often assign homework such as printing vocabulary or sentences from the text, using words to make sentences, read aloud, etc.

Grade 5-6: (1) Spelling activities: continued to teach spelling rules. Spelling games and activities were provided. (2) Conversation or Reading activities: used conversation scripted dialogues (e.g., asking about directions) and read some stories with illustrations and controlled vocabulary to learn grammar (e.g., 5-Wquestions, present/past tense, single or plural nouns, conjugation) and vocabulary (e.g. learn to spell the word and recognize its meaning). (3) Writing Activities: had students write a personal reflection in English and use vocabulary and grammar points taught in class to make sentences, fill in the blanks, etc.

The excerpt showed that lessons at each grade level are developed from letter/word recognition, and phonetic spelling to grammatical points and reading comprehension. Class activities in grades 1 and 2 emphasized listening and speaking, concentrating on authentic and communicative activities. Skill-oriented activities were minimized. Teachers explained that the major purpose is their English primary level is to "encourage fun, promote students' interests and confidence in English" (Teacher 1, Interview 2).

In contrast, observation in classes for grades 3-6 found that teachers combined the traditional skill activities (e.g. demonstration, drill practice, exercises, worksheets, reading aloud, copying letters or vocabulary, word-by-word translations) with communicative and authentic activities (e.g., brainstorming, role-play, paired work/conversation, role-play, group discussion). As Teacher 2 explained:

In order to help children develop their communicative competence, we should not merely focus on communicative or oral-based activities. Students still need to learn the rules, such as phonics, grammar rules, and vocabulary recognition so they will be able to use English to communicate appropriately in oral and written forms. However, this does not mean that I devoted much time to teaching grammar rules and vocabulary skills and having children do meaningless drill practices and memorization. When I teach phonics and grammar rules, I use some real-life dialogue, conversations, and examples from the stories for students to do some practice activities, such as role play (Interview 2).

The excerpt shows that the teacher still believed in the necessity of incorporating skill-oriented activities and

communicative activities into classes.

Discussions

The interview data showed that eight teachers advocated for the advantages of an earlier start in promoting young children's English phonemic development (pronunciation and accent). On the other hand, the majority of the teachers disagreed with the earlier=better idea, based on L1 and cultural concerns (the increase in an already heavy academic load and the distraction of L1 learning). They believed that older children are more efficient learners than younger. They can become native-like speakers (pronunciation) and promote syntactic development rather than younger children particularly through well-developed instruction (e.g., material use, classroom activities). The result supported Singleton's argument (1995) that children who started learning English at the higher grades have the potential to learn it to a very high level if the instructional environment is well-structured and motivated.

Interview data are continued confirmed that teachers all advocated the policy of English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level. They also agreed that multiple factors, such as a large size of students with mix levels of proficiency, insufficient teaching hours, limited multimedia facilities, parents' and students' attitudes toward English learning, affect the quality of English instruction and achievement for students and saw these as areas of difficulties in their teaching. As Nunn (1999), Singleton (1995), and Genesee (1978) have asserted, age is not the determining factor in successful foreign language learning. They both urge that an early start of English instruction should be combined with high quality teaching, well-developed curricula, sufficient resources, and adequate time for learning.

Second, all teachers perceived that this top-down policy of EFL learning and curriculum guidelines can enhance Taiwan's development in international business and communication and benefit students' future careers. They also agreed that the government sought to improve the earlier EFL curriculum, which focused on mechanical drills. Observation and interview showed that textbooks provide support and direction to help teachers follow curricular guidelines and develop lessons. Interview and observation data revealed that instead of drilling and skill practice, they tried to modify traditional activities by combining them with communicative activities to help students learn the alphabet, phonics, grammar points, and vocabulary in more authentic, communicative, and interesting ways. Specifically, observation found that primary-level teachers focused on authentic activities while upper-level teachers modified traditional skill-based activities and combined them with communicative activities to enable students to learn in a sequential order from phonological and orthographic development to syntax and semantic development. As Savignon (2002) stresses, learning to use language forms appropriately is also an important part of communicative competence. Learners focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative experiences and needs. However, explicit formal instruction should not "be perceived as limited to sentence-level morphosyntactical features" (p. 7).

The present study uncovered teachers' perspectives

and experiences. The results repeatedly confirm the idea that age is not the only factor affecting the success of EFL learning. Curricular renovation involves multiple and interrelated factors. As Wang (2002) states, "the factors which contribute to improve elementary teaching and learning in the classroom can be stratified into multiple levels.... Each is essential to the success of EFL learning" (p.146).

Conclusion

The findings of teachers' perspectives in relation to the top-down policy and its impact on students' learning and classroom practices serve as a starting point for future studies of the full development of curriculum innovation in Taiwan and other countries where English is taught as a foreign language in schools at the elementary level.

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