

“Why Do We Need to Learn English in Taiwan?”: English Language Ideologies in a Country Seeking Internationalization

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Abstract

Since 2005, English has been a compulsory subject for Taiwanese students from the third grade to the first year in college. However, little research has explored why English acquires so much emphasis and how Taiwanese students perceive English education. The present study endeavors to disclose English language ideologies in Taiwan by conducting a discourse analysis of English educational curriculums, a questionnaire survey with 156 senior high school students, and participant observations in the English classrooms. Results show that English is connected to advancement and taken as an instrumental aid. While the Taiwan government aims to approach to the center of the world, the students' objectives are oriented to socio-economic mobility. Future researchers may investigate the mediating roles of assessments between language planning and students' learning or the relationships between English language ideologies and the ongoing processes of developing Taiwanese national identity and building alliance with the USA.

Keywords

language ideology; language planning

Introduction

Taiwan is probably most well-known for its electronic goods exported around the globe and its relationship with China. Being an island country limited by its land size and constantly facing weapon threats across the Straits, Taiwan has long been aware of the need to develop a strong economy and international alliance, particularly with the USA. As observed in Chen's (2006) and Tsao's (2008) studies regarding the language planning (LP) situation in Taiwan, its foreign language policies, often equated to English education (EE) in Taiwan, are significantly oriented to such political and economical considerations.

The steadily increasing emphasis on English reached its peak in the 1990s, when the government decided to build Taiwan as the Asian-Pacific

economic and trading center and invested massive resources in promoting internationalization. A consensus has gradually formed that the first step in internationalizing Taiwan is to increase its citizens' English proficiency through sound EE, reflected in the constant revisions of English curriculums led by Ministry of Education (MOE). The age for EE has been lowered from the seventh grade in the Standards issued in 1968, downwards to the sixth grade in the 1990 Guidelines, to the fifth grade in the 2001 Guidelines, and to the third grade in the 2005 Guidelines. Since 2005, all Taiwanese students are required to take at least one class period of English per week, from the third grade to the first year in college. Out-of-school instruction for raising exam scores is popular. One quarter of the elementary school students have attended additional English tutoring, and more than 90% of high school students in big cities have reported the same experience (Hsieh, 2010). For what purposes do Taiwanese people need to spend so much energy and time learning a foreign language?

1 Language planning, English education, and English language ideologies

Language planning (LP) is a long-term, sustained, and conscious effort which is often authorized by the government in attempt to alter a language's function, solve communication problems, and establish ideal linguistic landscape (Wright, 2004). Because of its foundation on the societal *desirable* forms of language use, LP is influenced by and also reproduces language ideologies (Blommaert, 2006; Woolard, 1992). Michael Silverstein (1979) defines language ideologies as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use,” (p. 183). In other words, language ideologies are conceptions for one's attitudes towards a certain language's status, function, norm, ownership, etc. The English language ideologies (ELI) the current study explores are the beliefs based on which Taiwanese policy makers and students perceive and

feel about English-speaking countries and EE, and decide to learn or not to learn English. The ideological conceptions may not be conscious or explicit (Friedrich, 1989), and therefore, need to be explored through examinations of multiple information resources (Woolard, 1992).

Researchers have recorded the common beliefs in non-Anglophone countries that EE would be beneficial to national development and that English would act as a bridge in international cooperation (Clayton, 1999, 2002; Hsieh, 2010; Mufwene, 2010; Nunan, 2003; Pennycook, 1994; Wright, 2004). Competing explanations have been proposed for such ELIs (e.g. Fishman, 1996; Fishman, *et al.*, 1977; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1994; Tsuda, 1997; for discussion, see Clayton, 1999). In the national-functional paradigm, Fishman *et al.* (1977) maintain that national actors may make decisions favoring English under the consideration of political and economic interests for the nation. Noting the outcomes contradictory to the expected interests and unequal power relations across nations, Phillipson (1994) argues that the USA and Great Britain are the deciding forces for the spread of English language. In line with this international-critical perspective, Tsuda (1997) views English policies as manifestations of “English language hegemony” (p. 21). Pennycook (1994) further suggests that the exploitative potential of English is hidden behind the belief that the spread of English is “natural, neutral and beneficial” (p. 9).

More recently, Wallerstein (2004) applies the notions of core and periphery to explain the unequal international relations and complex global economic networks. The world-system model accommodates changes over time in the national core-peripheral configurations. According to the world-system model, EE is the effort to approach the core countries from the peripheral positions.

Researchers on EE have directed their attention to how peripheral nations and individuals utilize English as an instrument to achieve their objectives (e.g. Canagarajah, 1993; Clayton, 2002). In Clayton’s (2002) case study on Cambodian people’s attitudes toward the increasing emphasis on EE, the state-level LP is oriented to the national-functional paradigm while the general public perceives the importance of EE with individuals’ lived experiences. Canagarajah’s (1993) classroom ethnography illustrates the transformation of Sri Lankan college students’ attitudes toward EE. The students develop strategies to sufficiently pass the English course requirement and fulfill the socio-economic necessity while being detached from the alien cultural representations in the English textbooks.

Information of how local people who are affected by the state’s decisions perceive EE is critical for LP and EE, because LP, particularly when enforced through educational systems, needs to take into account students’ attitudes to be implemented successfully. However, little research has investigated Taiwanese people’s attitudes towards EE. Even less investigated is how EE is connected to internationalization through the state’s efforts, which may be traced in educational curriculums. This study attempts to fill the research gaps by adopting multiple research approaches in order to better our understanding of ELI and EE in Taiwan. The analysis results should offer suggestions to English educationists and researchers of language ideologies.

2 Methodologies

I use the discourse analysis approach to examine the ELI in the EE curriculums and ethnographic methods of interview and participant observation to explore high school students’ attitudes towards EE. First, I employed Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework to analyze the rationale and educational objectives in the English curriculums. After identifying the themes related to my research questions, I designed a questionnaire for students. Data also included my field notes in the English classrooms and follow-up interviews with the relevant students. The integration of the two research approaches to multiple information resources may better our understanding of the top-down programmatic attempts enacted by state institutions and the meanings of the EE practices to individuals in their localized contexts (Canagarajah, 2006; Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

2.1 Data collection and analysis

The curriculums I chose to examine are the Guidelines for English Education at the Compulsory Education Stage from grades one to nine (hereafter, *EE Guidelines 1-9*) and the Guidelines for English Education at the Senior High School Stage from grades ten to twelve (hereafter, *EE Guidelines 10-12*).

The questionnaires were completed by the 156 high school students who were taking English courses with me in the 2010 fall semester. One hundred and seven of them are from three eleventh grade classes and 39 from one tenth grade class. The school is a typical suburban public school, around 30 minutes train ride from Taipei, with students from the local community, neighboring towns, and Taipei. In general, the students’ English proficiency is at the intermediate level, based on the comparison of their scores on the joint entrance examinations to students from other schools.

I required the 156 students to write down three reasons for learning English and their own short and long-term learning objectives. A free-response word association task was added to elicit information about students' attitudes toward English (Szalay & Deese, 1978). I required the students to finish the two sentences: "I feel the people who have excellent English ability all look ..." and "Having excellent English ability means ..." The questionnaire was written in the students' native language, Chinese.

During the research time, I kept my researcher journal almost every workday, recording significant classroom events and my brief reflections after class. I also interviewed the related students and asked them to elaborate their responses in the questionnaire or classroom events.

3 Findings and discussion

Close examinations of the two EE curriculums generate two themes. First, English-speaking countries and English are associated with internationalization and advancement. Second, EE is programmed as an instrumental aid for real-life communication and for acquiring knowledge and practicing ethics. I will discuss the two themes in the following sections, along with the analysis results of the data from students.

3.1 English-speaking countries and their language in the modern world

The *EE Guidelines 1-9* describes the Taiwanese learners' position in relation to English-speaking countries in this way:

... through English language learning, learners can appropriately respond to the socio-cultural activities of English-speaking countries and increase understanding of and respect for multiple cultures. Furthermore, learners can use their English language ability for preparing the life in the twenty-first century. Such ability is an essential quality of being a global citizen. (MOE, 2006, p. 1)

In this document, English-speaking countries are given the role of a gatekeeper for global citizenship and their language is ratified as *the* language for gaining it. English education is the booth selling the ticket to the English-speaking countries, to internationalization, and to the 21st century. English-speaking countries are upheld in the center of the modern world system, whereas Taiwan is positioned as a peripheral country which needs to *appropriately respond* to the socio-cultural activities of the English-speaking countries.

The use of 'English-speaking countries,' instead

of 'English-speaking world,' strengthens the supremacy of English. On one hand, the term 'English-speaking countries' lumps together the countries having different levels of economic development and political power and speaking English variations at different scales of prestige (Blommaert, 2007). 'American English' is the norm the Taiwan EE targets, as shown in the textbooks commonly used in Taiwan (cf. Chen, 2006). On the other hand, other developed countries whose dominant languages are not English, for example, France, German, Japan, are excluded, even though these countries may have achieved multiculturalism to a degree no less than the so-called English-speaking countries have. By erasing the peripheral English-speaking countries and the highly developed non-English-speaking countries, the Guidelines connect English to the contemporary political hegemony, namely, the USA (cf. Irvine, 2001).

The association of English with the political hegemony is transformed in a way that American English is equated to English, which is further linked to the "leading world power with a flourishing economy, a fabulous cultural history, and world-wide prestige" (Blommaert, 2006, p. 248). English speakers are perceived to have the progressive qualities of the leading world power. Such an association manifests in students' responses to the free-response association item, "I feel the people who have excellent English ability all look" The analysis result yields 160 meaningful units from the 156 students, with four students offering two phrases. Among the 160 responses, 134 are oriented to refinement and advancement, such as "excellent," "confident," "vogue," "cool," and "professional."

The following episode occurred when the tenth graders read the free-response association item. I translated the Mandarin conversation into English and kept the key words' Mandarin pronunciations in the parenthesis for reference. The students' names are pseudonyms.

Episode 1 (September 28th, 2010)

Leon: People who have excellent English ability are all bigheaded (chopi)!

Teacher: Really?

Leon: They're all snobby (shili).

Teacher: Why?

Leon: They're snobbish of their excellent English ability (yingwen henxing a)! Many of them go to bilingual kindergartens (shangyu yozhiyan). They have money.

Teacher: Is it expensive to attend a bilingual?

Leon: Very expensive; more expensive than normal kindergartens. One of my junior high school classmates went to a bilingual

kindergarten. He could speak English well at young age. His family is super rich. His mom drove a Benz to school and picked him up. Looked bigheaded...

Peter: [Interrupt] I don't get the question. Good English speakers are just normal people (jo putongzen a). Aren't there people who speak English well but speak Mandarin with a strong Taiwanese accent (bushi yeyozen yingwen shoudehenhao keshique mankotaiwangouyu)?

Students' responses are ideologically mediated, indicating their understanding of EE in Taiwan and attitudes toward English speakers. To Leon, EE is costly and consequently those who afford more EE are associated with the materialistic images *bigheaded* and *snobby*. In supporting his argument that English speakers are distinctive from normal people, Leon associated EE with the comparatively more expensive and exclusive bilingual education, equating "bilingualism" to excellent English ability and ignoring the fact that a majority of Taiwanese people are bilingual in Mandarin and Taiwanese. Leon's responses support Mufwene's (2010) observation that English is still a marked language in some Asian countries like "Japan and Taiwan" (p. 45).

The surface meanings of Peter's and Leon's statements seem incompatible, but the discourse analysis of their presuppositions indicates that they both recognized the superior status of English. In arguing that people who have excellent English ability are "just normal people," Peter compared speakers of English and Taiwanese-accented Mandarin (TM), a linguistic variation which is often linked to deficiency, backwardness, and vulgarity (Su, 2008). When asked why he did not compare English speakers with standard Mandarin speakers, Peter said, "*But* speaking Mandarin is normal (henputong a)." If Peter linked English to standard Mandarin—the linguistic variation often given higher prestige than the indigenous linguistic variations—he would not be able to make his position any sense, at least not to most Taiwanese people. His rhetorical question makes sense only by contrasting two languages of *status at dichotomy* (Chen, 2007), which to Peter, are TM and English. In other words, English speakers are supposed to be contrasting from the deficient and unrefined TM speakers, although in reality, they may perform in the same way.

3.2 English as a development aid

The second theme emerging from the curriculum analysis is the instrumental functions of English and EE. English is related to not only the state internationalization and advancement but an individual's development, as the five goals in *EE*

Guidelines for 10-12 indicate:

- I. Enhancing English listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities for real-life communications;
- II. Developing abilities of logical thinking, analyzing, making sound judgments, integration and creation;
- III. Developing effective English learning strategies to establish a foundation for learners' autonomy and lifelong learning;
- IV. Cultivating interest in English learning and active attitudes towards exploring knowledge in every discipline to elevate understandings of liberal arts, science, and technology;
- V. Promoting understanding and respect for multiple cultures and cultivating a global vision and a world view of sustainable development. (MOE, 2010, p. 1)

These goals cover both domains of knowledge and ethics and concern individuals as well as the globe. English is a language for exploring knowledge in every discipline. Therefore, EE plays an important role in learners' lifelong learning (whether or not English proficiency is critical to their career plans). Moreover, English carries the ethical value of cultivating an international vision, enhancing respect for multiple cultures, and building welfare for the whole human family. By emphasizing the vital role EE plays in exploring knowledge and practicing ethics, the curriculum legitimizes English supremacy and at the same time positions Taiwan as a member of the global village sharing the responsibility of its sustainable development.

In contrast to the comprehensive goals in the *Guidelines*, the students appeared more concerned about the socio-economic mobility that EE may create for them. The tally result of students' responses to the free-association item, "Having excellent English ability means ...," shows that more than half of the students viewed English ability as an aid for career development rather than for any of the curriculum goals. When asked to write down three reasons for learning English in Taiwan, all the students thought of course requirements or competitiveness in the future job market.

In the follow-up interview, Lily, the eleventh grader who had considered changing her major from business to English but at the end of the semester changed it back, shared with me her experience and perceptions of learning English:

Since I was a child, my mom has always told me how important English is; with its mastery, you don't need to worry about unemployment.... I like to watch English speakers in the movies.

They look cool in the business suit and necktie, walking around to supervise employees. I wanted to be like them.... But recently I feel the English road may be not that wide. Seems you can only be an interpreter or a secretary. (Interview note, December 27, 2010)

In addition to associating English speakers with the professional and powerful images, Lily disclosed that the reasons why she learned English and decided not to change her major to English were the same: to obtain a better job. None of the five goals in the curriculum were mentioned.

As for the short-term objective, students learn English for course requirements or examinations. A majority of students (132) regarded passing examinations as their short-term objective of learning English, ranging from school exams or college entrance exams to the standardized exams such as the *GEPT* (*General English Proficiency Test*, developed under supervision from the Taiwan MOE) and *TOEIC* (*Test of English for International Communication*, USA). Passing examinations is the *real-life* objective of EE to most Taiwanese people.

A simple survey on the applications for government positions and graduate schools in Taiwan reveals that they all require English grades on some type of exam. Hsieh's (2010) analysis results of the interviews with the human resource personnel managers of the top 50 Taiwanese industries confirm this exam-orientation culture and the significant role that English ability plays in it. The managers claim that personality is more important than English ability but admit favoring applicants with a master or doctoral degree. In Taiwan, having the degrees means having passed competitive entrance examinations, most of which require high English test scores. In other words, English ability decides, directly or indirectly, one's qualification for an advanced education and a superior job.

3.3 Real-life communication in Taiwan

Both of the curriculums for compulsory education stage and senior high school stage place enhancing English abilities for "real-life communications" as their first goal. The descriptions of the core abilities in *Guidelines 10-12* or the competency indicators in *Guidelines 1-9* seem to refer to real-life communications as listening, speaking, reading, and writing English in classrooms, public places, or mass media. To most high school students, however, the need of using English for real-life communication seems not as much as the Guidelines suppose. In the landscape and mass media, Mandarin is the dominant language, and when English appears, it is usually accompanied

with Chinese translations (Curtin, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Even in English classrooms, the grammar translation approach still dominates (Nunan, 2003).

Episode 2 illustrates how English is perceived as a peripheral language in the EFL classroom. When I told the tenth-graders that I would report their monthly exam grades in English, the students objected:

Episode 2 (December 6th, 2011)

Students: We won't be able to understand you. Why don't you speak Mandarin?

Jim: Yeah, speak Mandarin; we're [pause] Chinese.

Teacher: But it's an English class.

Student: [code-switch to English] Speak Taiwanese. We're Taiwanese.

Teacher: [In Taiwanese] OK, now I'm going to announce your English grades in English.

Jim and other students: There will be at least one person who can't understand you.

Teacher: Who?

Jim and other students: Peter doesn't understand Taiwanese.

Teacher: OK, I'm going to announce your exam results in English and you HAVE to listen carefully.

Chad: Speak Hakka....

Student: Then probably nobody can understand her.

Students: That's true/[laughter]

Despite the mischievous attempt of English deficiency, the students' articulations are noteworthy in terms of the language ideology. There were displays of the monoglot ideology for a "one-to-one relation between national-administrative belonging and language use" (Blommaert, 2006, p. 245), confusion about national identity in naming, (Huang, 2007), and attention to the complex multilingual use in Taiwan. To these Taiwanese students, English is a language required to use in specially-made situations (e.g. examination and educational broadcast) by policy makers and practitioners (e.g. curriculum writers, test designers, and classroom teachers), but not a language at their disposal for *real-life communication*.

4 Implications

I have analyzed the English language ideologies in the curriculums and students' accounts. The results show that English-speaking countries are equated to the contemporary political and cultural leading countries, USA in particular, and English education to competitiveness and progression. English speakers, whether native or non-native, share the advancement image. English ability is a development aid not merely for a nation to build

relations with the political powers and approach to the center of the world but also for an individual to enter higher education and job market. Students learn English mostly for satisfying the educational requirements or pursuing socio-economic mobility, rather than seeking internationalization. These results offer implications to language ideology studies and English education.

4.1 Language ideology studies

The English language ideologies in Taiwan are complicated and cannot be fully explained by one single theory. The national-functional perspective and multinational attachment model may explain the state's emphasis on EE but not individuals' lived experiences. Most Taiwanese students learn English to satisfy the localized requirement for socio-economic mobility. Although a few of the students link English language and education to negative images, such critical reflections as "chasing modernization while looking down upon local traditions" or "forgetting cultural heritage" are rare and may reflect the personal emphasis on Chinese cultural heritage rather than the awareness of the English exploitive potential proposed by Phillipson (1994) or other international-critical scholars. The supremacy of the USA in the modern world system is ascribed by national actors and strengthened through requirements of English ability in course assessments and entrance examinations to advanced education. The examination culture is further strengthened by the employment recruitments. However, in terms of real-life communication in Taiwan, English is a peripheral language. To the EFL learners, English appears to have situated statuses in accordance with their situated needs. While the EE goals programmed by the national actors may be seen as "the authoritarian imposition of socio-cultural value that makes learners subservient" (Widdowson, 2004, p. 361), the EFL students may learn English for utilitarian, situated, and disposable purposes. In this aspect, neither the state's EE goals nor students' learning objectives emphasize the communicative function of the language as an expression of one's identity.

Research on LP or EE needs to attend to the local cultural and political context which, in Taiwan's case, refers to the abiding emphasis on examinations and its complicated relations with China and USA. Future researchers may investigate the mediating roles of assessments between language planning and students' learning. Another research direction are the seemingly-competing statuses of Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English, and their interweaving relationships with the ongoing processes of developing Taiwanese national identity,

maintaining the Chinese cultural heritage while resisting against its political threat, and seeking alliance with the USA.

4.2 English education

To achieve the educational goal of cultivating a global vision while avoiding reproducing English hegemony, English education should integrate the concepts of world Englishes (Matsuda, 2002), English as an international language (McKay, 2003), and English as a lingua franca (Bruthiaux, 2003). English variations around the world and their users from different ethno/nationalities should be introduced so students are more likely to understand English variations and their communicative functions across ethno/nationalities. Moreover, in guiding students to transfer their English learning experiences to learning its variations and other languages and cultures, EE can enhance multiculturalism. Investigation of the feasibility and strategies of such integration in the Taiwanese high schools under pressure of examinations is beyond the scope of this study yet warrants future research.

This study also reveals that most of the students learn English for passing examinations and implies that assessments cast decisive impact on EE in Taiwan. To direct the societal attention to the communication goal of language education via the washback of high-stake examinations, the joint entrance examinations must adopt communicative forms (Yalden, 1983), or alternatively, legitimize the results of the holistic examinations, such as *GEPT* and *TOEIC*, as a substitute for the current traditional examinations. In addition, the MOE should encourage exchange students to Taiwan or sponsor Taiwanese students for study abroad to equip them with opportunities of and needs for using English in international communication.

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