

English Coaching in Taiwan Public Elementary Schools: Is it Possible?

Judy Yu-Li Hsu

Harvard Graduate School of Education

yuh874@mail.harvard.edu

Abstract

Though English education has been strongly emphasized in Taiwan's public schools, the outcomes have not been satisfactory. One cause may be teachers' lack of English competence. Professional development for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Taiwan has mostly focused on instructional skills and strategies, rather than on improving teachers' own English abilities. Through a literature review and interviews, this exploratory study investigates whether the concepts and practices associated with literacy coaching in the United States would be transferable to Taiwan. They may provide a mechanism to enhance English education, which could lead to further investigations into methods of professional development for Taiwan EFL teachers.

Keywords

Literacy coaching, EFL, English instruction, professional development, U.S., Taiwan, public elementary school

Introduction

A literacy coach is one who helps teachers to recognize what they know and can do, assists teachers as they strengthen their ability to make more effective use of what they know and do, and supports teachers as they learn more and do more. (Toll, 2005, p. 4).

This study synthesizes a literature review and interviews with two former Taiwanese English as a

foreign language (EFL) teachers, one former Taiwanese classroom teacher, and one former U.S. literacy coach, in order to investigate whether the concept and practice of literacy coaching in the United States would help improve the English teaching situation in Taiwan. The teachers and coach were each interviewed for 30 minutes in October, 2009; more details are available in the appendices.

This paper describes the Taiwan context and what English teachers might need in terms of professional development. It then presents the various sources for professional development in Taiwan and the problem within. It further discusses how English coaching might be a good way to address the problem and the possible obstacles to implementing English coaching in the Taiwan public elementary education system. It ends by suggesting possible first steps and hopes for implementing English coaching in the Taiwan context. Throughout the paper the term *English coaching* is used to describe coaching for EFL teachers in Taiwan.

1 English Instruction in Taiwan

Crystal (2002) estimated that a fourth of the world's population speaks English as a first, second, or foreign language. It has increasingly become the international language for trade, business, science and technology, entertainment and the Internet, and even sports (cited in Su, 2006, p. 265). Thus, in 1949 the government of Taiwan started English

instruction in secondary schools; students studied English for six hours per week (Zhang, 1992, cited in Su, 2006, p. 266). Then, in 1998, the Ministry of Education announced that English instruction would move from senior high schools to elementary schools, beginning in 2001 (Su, 2006, p. 266). English courses of two 40-minute sessions per week were implemented for fifth and sixth graders. In 2003, one 40-minute English session was added to the weekly courses of third and fourth graders (Chou, 2008, p. 530).

Though the goals of the English curriculum are to develop students' basic competence in communication, to cultivate their English learning interests and habits, and to introduce them to international culture and social customs (Chou, 2008, p. 530), Savignon and Wang (2003) found a mismatch between learner needs and preferences and the reported experience of classroom instruction. In addition, Du-Babcock and Du-Babcock (1987) observed that the grammar-translation and audio-lingual teaching methods are predominant in English teaching in Taiwan. As a result, English learners in Taiwan are very good at explaining the rules of English but often cannot use English for communication (Liang 1994, as cited in Savignon & Wang, 2003, p. 238).

One reason for this discrepancy between the expectations embedded in the curriculum and the outcomes for students could be the lack of English competence of Taiwanese EFL teachers. Butler (2004) reported that government officials have called for teachers to start focusing on oral communication skills in English instruction, but it is not clear that most teachers have sufficient English proficiency and confidence to deliver English lessons and instruct their students effectively. The Taiwanese EFL teachers who participated in her study reported that their proficiency levels were lower in speaking and

writing (productive skills) than in listening and reading (receptive skills) (as cited in Su, 2006, pp. 269-270). In addition, the literacy coach I interviewed offered this explanation: Since the structure of English education focuses on reading and writing but not on speaking, most EFL teachers have difficulty delivering English lessons in the language. Instruction is given mainly in Mandarin Chinese, which is not an ideal way to provide instruction in English. Therefore, EFL teachers in Taiwan clearly need to enhance their English competence and their confidence to deliver lessons in English.

1.1 Professional Development in Taiwan

The in-service education law for Taiwanese teachers of kindergarten through junior high school states that teachers should attend at least 18 hours or 1 credit of in-service training each school year (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers in Taiwan can pursue professional development in many places. The Ministry of Education offers workshops on various topics, and universities and institutions offer for-credit and non-credit courses. Many e-learning websites are also available. At times schools send "seed teachers" to particular workshops to gain new knowledge or strategies that they can then introduce to their colleagues. According to one teacher I interviewed, teachers can also apply for unpaid leave and pursue a further degree within the country or abroad. In general, schools encourage teachers to participate in such in-service education.

However, the workshops and courses provided for EFL teachers often focus on instruction skills and strategies, rather than on improving teachers' English ability, according to another interviewee. Professional development for EFL teachers mostly focuses on short-term results: skills and strategies for teaching English instead of

scaffolded steps to enhance EFL teachers' language competence. For instance, many teachers would ask for activity designs that they could use the very next day. As the interviewed teacher pointed out, this may be a result of the traditional expectations of EFL teachers and instruction: test scores equal the level of English competence. She also mentioned that English is not introduced in a communicative way that would motivate students to learn the language. Instead, good teaching seems to be regarded as an accumulation of pedagogical techniques in addition to previous experience transmitting subject matter knowledge including linguistics and pedagogy. This concept has been held consistently for years in primary and secondary schools (Liou, 2001, p. 198).

1.2 Proposal: Implementing English Coaching in Taiwan

A practice quite similar to coaching exists in some Taiwan schools: when professors conduct studies on education that need data from schools, they might cooperate with those schools by helping teachers in certain ways. Since the assistance for teachers would be primarily based on the professors' research, this means that teachers' practical needs are not always met, according to one interviewee.

Taiwan needs to improve the quality of its EFL teachers by enhancing their English-speaking ability. English coaching could be a response to Chou's (2008) call to assure success in elementary English instruction in an EFL context, by creating a sound in-service teacher training program for EFL teachers (p. 540). To improve EFL teachers' level of English competence and the quality of their instruction delivery, I suggest three main practices for English coaching in Taiwan: form teacher study groups, introduce reflective coaching, and utilize protocols.

1.2.1 Teacher Study Groups

No educator can work alone. Even if they may seem to work by themselves, they are affected by their colleagues (McDonald et al., 2007, p. 3). Teacher study groups could generate a professional setting in which teachers could collaborate, share, learn more, support curriculum change, and provide feedback among peers (Moran, 2007, p. 65). Since some elementary schools in Taiwan already have teacher study groups, according to one interviewee, English coaches could promote and strengthen these groups by building on EFL teachers' competence. In the study group meetings, coaches could demonstrate and model how to deliver instruction in English. The study group could create genuine opportunities for teachers to practice teaching in English by helping them prepare and present teaching materials in the study group before class (Murdoch, 1994). Moreover, coaches could recruit qualified English speakers to work in schools as language resource persons for EFL teachers; this idea was suggested by the literacy coach.

1.2.2 Reflective Coaching

Reflective coaching could be incorporated into the activities of the teacher study groups, as "Development implies change, and fruitful change is extremely difficult without reflection" (Wallace, 1991, p. 54, as cited in Liou, 2001, p. 199). Critical reflection increases teachers' awareness of teaching, triggers deeper understanding, and spurs positive change (Liou, 2001, p. 199). Yet, as reflection is not innate, it would need to be guided and learned (Liou, 2001, p. 206). In addition, teachers differ in their ability to reflect on experience (Pennington, 1996, as cited in Liou, 2001, p. 206). Thus, English coaches would play a supportive role in helping teachers self-reflect.

English coaches could facilitate collaborative conversations to help teachers reflect, evaluate their teaching, and recognize their own success in improving students' achievement, as well as note room for growth. In the study groups, coaches would ask questions to elicit conversation, not in a didactic way but as a peer (Peterson, Taylor, Burnham & Schock, 2009, p. 507). In coaching for self-reflection, the coach and teacher would work as partners to make more effective decisions about instruction (Peterson, et al., 2009, p. 501).

1.2.3 Protocols

Chou (2008) found that EFL teachers shape their practical knowledge by modifying what they have gained from training programs, classroom experience, and their existing knowledge about English instruction. These factors have more influence than the theories, methods, or materials (Chou, 2008, p. 539) that are often provided in in-service workshops and courses.

Therefore, a means to assist teachers in understanding and learning from their experiences are protocols, which are frameworks that help participants discuss issues and achieve voluntary regulation within a contingent environment (McDonald et al., 2007, pp. 4-5). They also provide a way to collect and examine data (Peterson, et al., 2009, p. 502). Through protocols, educators could analyze their daily tasks metacognitively and make transparent the steps they take to understand and solve a problem or plan an intervention.

Protocols may also remind educators to take time to listen and notice, to think about what they want to express, to work step-by-step, and to speak either less or more, all of which encourage a collaborative social construct of knowledge learning (McDonald et al., 2007, p. 7). The use of protocols could make more productive the discussions on improving instruction and data

analyses.

1.3 Potential Obstacles

However, as promising as the above English coaching model might appear, two major obstacles exist: the cultural context of Taiwan, and teachers' lack of motivation to improve their skills.

1.3.1 Cultural Tradition

Situated southeast of continental China, across the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan has been an island of immigrants, most of whom migrated from the southeastern part of China. These immigrants bear the Chinese lifestyle and cultural traditions (Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 211). In Chinese tradition, teachers have been respected for their "morally and intellectually superior" image (Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 214). Two maxims illustrate this tradition: "One should respect one's teacher as if he were one's father even if the teacher-student relationship exists only for a single day" (Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 217) and "All other things are of lower class, only the scholar is of the highest class" (Chen, 1983, as cited in Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 217). Given the high respect they receive both symbolically and socially, it may be difficult for teachers to let others observe their lack of English proficiency in class or in front of others who are more fluent than they are, according to one interviewee.

Another emphasis in Chinese culture is *Zhang You Xu* (venerating those who are older): the younger person must respect the older one, and the older must care for the younger. Because of this tradition, teachers may find it difficult to accept coaching from a younger individual (McKenna & Walpole, 2008, p. 196). As one interviewee stated, teachers might be worried about their English skills and defensive about improving their practice. Two other interviewees suggested that teachers could

also be resistant to accepting suggestions from foreigners, or lack confidence in coaches who have no teaching experience in Taiwan.

1.3.2 Low Motivation

According to three teachers I interviewed, apart from pursuing self-enhancement and finding solutions to problems, one of the main motivations that many Taiwanese teachers have for enrolling in professional development courses is merely the desire to rank higher on the pay scale. One interviewee pointed out that it is unclear whether teachers put energy into or gain much from these courses.

Once teachers enter the profession, over-protection of their job security contributes to their inertia (Fwu & Wang, 2002a, p. 159). Teachers are rarely fired, except in cases of severe misconduct (Fwu, 1995, 2000; Wu, 1997, as cited in Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 216). Thus, habitually underperforming teachers usually remain in their jobs for as long as they like. As Fwu and Wang (2002a, p. 159) explained, many teachers stay even after they discover that they are not suited for teaching, or not interested in it, as they might hold attitudes such as “submitting to their destiny as a teacher.”

Furthermore, as Xu (1995, as cited in Fwu & Wang 2002a, p. 159) states, being a teacher is like having an “iron bowl”: it guarantees job security, as well as steady benefits and salary. Teachers have three months of vacation, two months in summer and one in winter, and a full-year salary with a 1.5 month bonus. Elementary and junior high school teachers are exempt from income tax. Teachers also have other benefits such as loans at low interest rates, comprehensive health insurance, subsidies for their children’s education, and a handsome government-funded pension program. They can choose to retire at age 50 with a full pension and

total benefits; the pension could equal to 75% to 95% of their regular salaries (Fwu, 1995, 2000; Wu, 1997, as cited in Fwu & Wang, 2002b, p. 216).

Thus, to many teachers, professional development is unnecessary. Participating in workshops and courses is merely a means of boosting their career experience, which helps them to move up to a higher pay level.

1.4 Hopes and First Steps

Despite the obstacles mentioned above, I still see hope for implementing English coaching in Taiwan’s elementary educational system. One interviewee suggested a premise that could serve as the foundation for this coaching model: decide how high an EFL teacher’s level of English competence should be and coach her or him to reach that level. Considerable time and effort would also need to be invested to build relationships with EFL teachers to gain their confidence in coaches’ suggestions, according to another interviewed teacher. Such a program could begin in a public elementary school in Taiwan where the administrators, teachers, and parents are willing and supportive to try something new to improve English instruction, as the literacy coach suggested.

The literacy coach also suggested that English coaches could start by recruiting qualified volunteer English speakers, and providing them with incentives such as stipends and recognition. Subsequently, coaches could bring Taiwanese EFL teachers and the volunteers together to discuss and integrate potentially good ideas for language instruction and good practices. Later, coaches could match Taiwanese EFL teachers with volunteers who could support the teachers in improving their English. Coaches would also visit each of the participating classrooms to model instruction, co-teach, and support lessons one-on-one. Out of class, the coaches, EFL teachers, and volunteers

could also meet in study groups to discuss the classes. This is where protocols would be used and reflective coaching would take place.

Taiwan greatly needs competent users of English, as English is an important tool for exchanging knowledge and information in the areas of culture, technology, and business. It also connects people from different cultures and countries (Savignon & Wang, 2003, p. 226). EFL teachers in Taiwan have the responsibility of providing their students with access to the global world through English. They should set themselves up as role models for their students, as one teacher told me. Thus, to boost teachers' motivation for self-improvement, they need long-term quality control measures. These include evaluations, reexamination of their professional competence, renewals of licenses, and re-certifications for career advancement (Fwu & Wang, 2002a, p. 162); a teacher confirmed these ideas.

1.5 Limitation, Conclusions, and Future Study

This small study is based on literature and interviews. More fieldwork will be needed to understand the current situation in Taiwanese public elementary English classrooms, and experiments should be designed and implemented to test whether the proposed English coaching model is indeed feasible and would help improve Taiwanese EFL teachers' English competence and curriculum delivery.

It is essential to help EFL teachers acquire more English knowledge, pursue professional development, and become competent EFL teachers (Chou, 2008, p. 540). Professional development will not be successfully established unless the social cultural context and the educational system provide support (Liou, 2001, p. 206). Implementing a communicative program means surmounting many obstacles, and doing so is not the

responsibility of teachers and learners alone. It requires effort from administrators, parents, and society as a whole (Kleinsasser, 1993, as cited in Savignon & Wang, 2003, p. 240).

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southern Taiwan for three years. During his time there, he worked in a *bushiban* (cram school) and a public elementary school, and also recruited 100 North American teachers of English to work in public schools in Taiwan. He has had extensive contact with public schools, has spoken repeatedly with an assistant superintendent for English language arts, and has watched, directly or indirectly, the development of English language instruction in southern Taiwan over the past decade. After his experience in Taiwan, he taught in a U.S. middle school for four years, and then worked as a literacy coach for two years. He was interviewed on October 22, 2009.

Pei-Ling Cheng is a Taiwanese classroom teacher who taught elementary school in northern Taiwan for two years. She is now pursuing a master's degree in Human Development and Family Studies in the United States. She was interviewed on October 24, 2009.

Ru-Chung Huang taught English for two years in northern Taiwan. She also has experience as a lecturer for early-age EFL teachers at a renowned foundation that promotes pre-school education. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in special education in Taiwan. She was interviewed on October 25, 2009.

Chi Lee is pursuing an Ed.M. in TESOL at a U.S. university. For four years she taught English to junior high school and vocational school students in northern Taiwan. She was interviewed on October 24, 2009.

3 Appendices

3.1 Appendix A. Information on Interviewees

All interviews were conducted via phone and email in October, 2009. Pseudonyms were used and identifying information was obscured to insure the anonymity of all interviewees.

Brian Smith has worked as an EFL teacher in

3.2 Appendix B. Questions for Interviewees

1. What are the main challenges of teaching and learning (English) in Taiwan?
2. What do you think could be improved in terms of (English) teacher quality/ teacher development in Taiwan? How could coaching help them?

3. Would coaching be a good idea for Taiwanese (English) teachers' professional development?

4. What do you see as the challenges to implementing coaching in the Taiwanese educational system?