

English Development and Policy in Taiwan: A Guide for Native English-Speaking Teachers

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English has become the global language; people use it to communicate with each other in many circumstances, such as international business or technological knowledge exchange. According to Jung and Norton (2002), “In many non-English speaking countries, a learner’s acquisition of English can be profoundly affected by a government’s policy toward the role of English in society and also by the procedures for implementing those decisions in its education system” (as cited in Huang, 2005). Correspondingly, the Taiwanese government has established many English education policies since the 1950s. The Taiwanese Council for Economic Planning and Development (2002) cites developments that address ways to enhance practical English skills for daily life, balance urban and rural English education, and improve government employees’ English proficiency (as cited in Huang, 2005).

With the understanding that each country has unique circumstances, the purpose of this paper is to help prospective English teachers in Taiwan understand the role of language study and the development of English education there. Taiwanese English education has been dramatically improved by the government, and it can be approached from several angles because of its complexity.

Languages in Taiwan

Taiwan is a small country, but it is a multilingual society. Mandarin, Tai-yu (Taiwanese), and Hakka are the three major languages in Taiwan. The majority of people speak Tai-yu and Hakka, but Mandarin is the official language in Taiwan. Nonetheless, people may not know that speaking Tai-yu and Hakka was prohibited in the past. As Hsiau (1997) claims, in 1948, Tai-yu and Hakka were

degraded to the status of “dialects,” and the government announced a Mandarin-only National Language Policy. People could not speak these dialects in public; otherwise, they would be punished. After several political revolutions, however, people now feel free to speak other dialects. On the other hand, English brought another revolution to Taiwan. With changes in government language policy, English was supposed to be a semi-official language of Taiwan by 2008; but now, in 2010, the Taiwanese government is still working on this aspect. This shows that English is the main tool for enhancing the status of Taiwan on the global stage (as cited in Hunag, 2005). In short, many languages are spoken in Taiwan, but foreign language proficiency in English plays an important role. Not only does it help people to communicate with other international people, but it also represents the status of a country in the world.

The Development of Policy for English Instruction in Taiwan

All Taiwanese students are required to take English, so the development of English plays an important role in students’ schooling. Since 1949, the Taiwanese government has mandated English instruction in secondary schools. Initially, secondary schools (for students aged 12 – 18) focused on reading and writing skills, and colleges focused on reading and listening (Su, 2006). According to Chen (1999), English education was teacher-centered, with a focus on grammar-translation, which emphasizes linguistic over communicative competence (as cited in Su, 2006, p. 266). In 1999, however, the Ministry of Education altered the instructional guidelines for English instruction in secondary schools. There were seven points in these new instructional guidelines:

1. “Improve students’ basic communicative competence in reading, writing, speaking and listening,
2. Prepare students to make effective use of English language and knowledge,

3. Choose topics relevant to students' daily lives, needs and interests,
4. Help develop students' autonomy in learning English,
5. Address cross-cultural issues (e.g., social customs),
6. Incorporate reading, writing, speaking and listening into class activities, and
7. Incorporate the use of technology in classes" (Su, 2006, p. 267).

These guidelines reflect the Taiwanese government's desire to improve students' language skills and cultural awareness. With the focus on students' acquisition of language fluency rather than precise and rote memorization, English teachers in Taiwan are trying to use real-life topics in lessons, such as holidays, customs, and entertainment.

In short, the Taiwanese government would like to improve the internationalization of Taiwan in order to enhance its economic and technological competitiveness (as cited in Huang, 2005). It seems English plays a paramount role; English education will be good for business in Taiwan. This new language policy not only enhances English proficiency levels in Taiwan but also helps private English institutes increase their business because Taiwanese people are willing to go to cram schools after daily work or school. Therefore, the government and several private English institutes are investing extensively in this area.

Phonics and Phonetic Symbols Instruction in Taiwan

Taiwanese schools use *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* (Kenyon and Knott, 1944/1953)¹. This pronunciation guide uses the International Phonetic Alphabet. Since many

students have a weak grasp of the phonetic symbols and limited opportunities for practice, they have problems learning pronunciation (Li, 2004). “As far as phonics, it has been used for a long period of time (more than ten years) in Taiwan. But there are no explicit or consistent guidelines for school teachers” (Li, 2004, p.3). Because of limited opportunity for phonics instruction in the public schools, many students attend private cram schools to work on their pronunciation skills. In short, both English learners and teachers in Taiwan lack detailed and consistent guidelines for improving English pronunciation skills. Perhaps that is why native English-speaking teachers are popular in Taiwan, especially in private English cram schools; they can provide clear models to help students improve their pronunciation. Because of this significant need for English language students to develop their pronunciation skills, learning the International Phonetic Alphabet is also important for native English speakers who want to teach in Taiwan.

English Immersion Education in Taiwan

Various studies show that immersion education greatly benefits English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Recently, the Taiwanese government announced many new policies related to immersion education, and there are two significant improvements in this area.

First, there is the concept from South Korea about English villages, which offer a kind of immersion education for students. The Taiwanese government has sent education experts to South Korea to learn how to establish an English village. This language village offers an all-English language environment. It looks like a Western English-Speaking country, which gives students experiences in places such as simulated airports and supermarkets. Teachers in the village design programs related to the specific areas for each scenario and provide authentic reading materials for language learning. Students enhance their speaking skills and develop greater self-confidence and interest developing their English language proficiency (“Upgrading *English*,” 2008).

Second, private schools in Taiwan are allowed to offer a complete English immersion experience in all subjects in the elementary and secondary curriculum. Like English villages, these private schools can offer Taiwanese students an immersion education in a good learning environment (“Private Schools,” 2009). These schools also address the needs of the increasing number of foreign people who are working in Taiwan. If Taiwan cannot offer a good English education environment to native English-speaking foreigners, these people may not want to work in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government pays close attention to this serious issue. By allowing schools to use English as the language of instruction to meet the required educational standards, the government supports Taiwanese students learning English as well as the children of foreigners working in Taiwan. As more all-English schools are established in Taiwan, the need for native English-speaking teachers will grow.

Hiring Native English Speakers

Taiwanese people are interested in hiring native English speakers (NESs) to educate them. Not only can NESs improve learners' English proficiency, but learners also have opportunities to practice their social skills with foreign people. Therefore, teaching opportunities for NESs are increasing every year. NESs who would like to teach English in Taiwan should evaluate several aspects, such as educational requirements and salary scale. Yen (2002) states that before 2003 there was no formal governmental policy related to the hiring of NESs even though the EFL business was popular in Taiwan (as cited in Jeon and Lee, 2006). Since 2003, pre-schools, universities, and private English cram schools have hired NESs via licensed recruitment agencies. Although there are still no specific or formal regulations to conduct hiring NESs, teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree. According to the Taiwanese Bureau of Education, the majority of NESs who are university graduates from English-speaking countries will be offered permission to work (Jeon and

Lee, 2006). Salary scale depends on whether or not NESs have TESOL training. As Yen (2002) states, generally, if a NES has TESOL certification, he/she is paid approximately US\$1,870 every month; if the NES does not have a certificate, he/she is paid approximately US\$1,540 every month. A teacher's schedule will include fifteen to twenty-five hours of classroom instruction per week (as cited in Jeon and Lee, 2006)². In short, all schools and private English institutes welcome NESs to teach in Taiwan because of high demand. However, it is highly recommended that anglophones have extensive training in TESOL if they want to teach English in Taiwan.

Conclusion

In Taiwan, having English proficiency is valued, and the Taiwanese government plays a pivotal role to assist their people to achieve this goal. "Knowledge of English is perceived as one of the most important tools for establishing Taiwan as the Asian-Pacific center for transportation management, technology, and humanities" (Lo, 2006, p.25). This paper represents and addresses several aspects in terms of Taiwanese English education and its development and policies. It should be a useful resource for people who are going to teach English in Taiwan.

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Footnotes

¹ To learn more about this book, please check the following link.:

http://www.amazon.com/Pronouncing-Dictionary-American-English/dp/0877790477/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1282058063&sr=1-1

² Because of unexpected economic conditions, the majority of Taiwanese private companies and government agencies have not increased salaries substantially during the past decade (2001 – 2010).