Taiwanese Students Talk About English in Taiwan and Their Lives

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Background and Purpose

Crystal (2003) described the 1990s as a decade that saw "an increasingly public recognition of the global position of English." He observed that the spread of English "as a global lingua franca" was a situation that would only intensify in the near future (p. x). Lingua franca, defined as a language "widely used beyond its native speakers" and "primarily for international commerce and extending to other cultural exchanges" (Lockergnome Encyclopedia, 2005), is not a descriptor invented solely for the English language. Several languages, including Greek, French, and German, have also historically served as the lingua franca of various parts of the world (Lockergnome Encyclopedia, 2005). French previously served as "the lingua franca of diplomacy" (Infoplease, 2005). However, none of these other languages have ever been used and taught to the extent that English has, due in part to the dissemination of information through an 80% English language internet (China Daily, 2003).

Crystal's (2003) predictions came to fruition in the May 2002 Taiwanese government policy statement, Challenge 2008: National Development Plan (2002-2007), where the importance of English to the economic and technological advancement of Taiwan was formally endorsed. The objective of the plan was to enhance Taiwan's internationalization, thus improving the nation's competitive edge both economically and technologically (Executive Yuan, 2003). Among the various implementation strategies for the achievement of this goal, is the development of "an internationalized living environment and enhance[ment of] people's English proficiency," which includes development of an English living environment, a balance of urban and rural English education resources, internationalization of college education, enhancement of government employees' English proficiency, and promotion of international cultural exchanges (Council for Economic Planning and Development, 2002). In addition, the Taiwanese government also plans to make English the semi-official language of Taiwan by the year 2008, thus recognizing English as the major tool for improving the country's status on the global stage (Executive Yuan, 2003).

The focus on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is not novel; however, it has recently gained considerable momentum. The Taiwanese government has begun to provide scholarships for foreign students and to encourage courses in English at the tertiary level as a method of attracting students from abroad. The possibility of English becoming a semi-official language of the nation, a status for which not even Tai-yu, the language spoken

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by a majority of the Taiwanese people, has never been considered, is notable. These two undertakings demonstrate an official effort to insert English into domains which have previously only belonged to Mandarin. The Taiwanese government views English as playing an important role in increasing the country's competitive edge and its "internationalization." Kubota (2002) explains "internationalization" as that which "aims to transform social and institutional conventions to adapt to the international demands" (p. 16).

**Statement of the Problem**

Jung and Norton (2002) contend that, "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 educational system" (p. 246). However, neither the government nor the research and educational professions in Taiwan have completely accepted the idea in practice. Instead, methods of teaching have been the main issue of interest (Chen, 2003). Tollefson (2000), unsatisfied with how the sociopolitics of English language teaching have been marginalized by pedagogical concerns, calls for English language educators to "understand the direct and powerful impact of social, political, and economic forces upon their classrooms and how these forces affect students' lives" (p. 19). Without such knowledge, how can educators make claims about how best to teach their students? How can curriculum and policy-makers claim to be designing anything that would benefit students' learning?

Gorlach (2002) observed that "[r]esearch on forms and functions of English in Southeast Asian communities is generally scarce, considering the number of speakers and the historical and political importance of the phenomenon" (pp. 107-108). Yet, it is this emphasis on the forms and functions with which Pennycook (2001) is dissatisfied. Pennycook objects to how research regarding the spread of English "failed to problematize the causes and implications of this spread" and has only focused on "descriptions of varieties of English" and "questions of standardization and intelligibility" (p. 86). Taken together, these two scholars point to the importance of research on English in Asian countries, which focuses not only on the forms and functions of English varieties, but also on how these nations' mother tongues are understood and conceptualized by its citizens as a result of and in relation to global English. Taiwan, an East Asian country with its own distinct variety of English, is not a "postcolonial state" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 7), nor is it an economic or technological powerhouse (such as Japan). Unlike some of its neighbors, Taiwan is not suffering from war and poverty. As a result, Taiwan has received little, if any, linguistic research attention, despite the fact that it has been deeply impacted by the global spread of English. Opting for Taiwan as the center and setting of this study, the author hopes to draw attention to Taiwan as a contributing and participating member of the "global" English-dominated community.

**Purpose of the Study**

observations of language in Taiwan, the aim of this research is to explore the impact of English on students from an East Asian country categorized by Kachru (1992) as belonging to the "expanding circle" of English (as cited in Kam & Wong, 2004, p. 7). More specifically, the purpose of this research is to explore how university and college students in Taiwan understand the role of English in their lives, in relation to other mother tongue Taiwanese languages, and the ways in which their understanding relates to the global spread and dominance of English. This study is an attempt to shed light on Taiwanese university and college students' conceptualization of the English and Taiwanese languages, and how that conceptualization relates to larger national and global sociopolitical forces.

Languages in Taiwan

Taiwan is a multi-ethnic and multilingual society that consists of four ethnic groups: the Southern Min people, the Hakka, the Mainlanders, and the indigenous Austronesians (Tsao, 2004). The former three groups of people represent approximately 98% of the population in Taiwan (Government Information Office, 2004), the Southern Mins being the majority ethnic group.

Languages in Taiwan can be divided into three categories: the "mother tongues," the official language, and languages for wider communication. Mandarin is the designated official language of Taiwan, and English is the major language of wider communication. However Japanese, French, and German are also becoming increasingly popular foreign languages in Taiwan (Tsao, 1999).

Taiwanese mother tongues include Tai-yu, Hakka, and Mandarin (Government Information Office, 2004). Tai-yu is the mother tongue of the Southern Min people, and Hakka is the mother tongue of the Hakka people. The Southern Mins and the Hakka are the two major groups of Han people who began immigrating to Taiwan from the coastal provinces of China in the 16th century. Mandarin is the common language spoken by the group Taso, also termed the "Mainlanders," those who retreated to Taiwan from China with Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) government in 1949.

The Chinese immigrants who came to Taiwan in 1949 sought to establish their political dominance by strict control from the very beginning of their regime (Hsiau, 1997). Constraining language usage was one strategy to achieve this control. In 1948, Tai-yu was declared to be "inadequate for academic and cultural communication" (Chen, 1979, as cited in Chen, 2003, p. 59). Furthermore, languages in Taiwan were demoted to the status of dialects, and only Mandarin retained the status of a language (Hsiau, 1997). Mandarin became the sole medium of instruction in schools in Taiwan beginning in 1956. It was also designated as the sole legitimate language in public and official domains (Hsiau, 1997). Through political force, Mandarin gradually ascended to the official language of Taiwan, and was deliberately delineated as a more prestigious and "high-class" language than Tai-yu (Chen, 2003).
English in Taiwan

Chen (2003) explains that "the success of the British colonial empire and the subsequent rise of American economic and technological hegemony" (p. 65) have all contributed to the dominance of English in the world. The primacy of English has influenced English-language policies in Taiwan, that is, the promotion of English in Taiwan has been driven largely by economic needs (Tsao, 2001). Learning English is explicitly stated by the government as one of the major ways to boost the efficiency of the workforce, and also a major avenue toward increasing competitiveness of the country in terms of both commerce and technology (Executive Yuan, 2003). Perhaps, the increasing prominence of English in Taiwan has unintentionally contributed to the status of English as a global language.

The role and function of English in Taiwanese society, although still debated and questioned by some, has been accepted by the public. English, a foreign language to the Taiwanese linguistic majority, has become an integral part of Taiwan's economic, financial, and technological development. It is also a leading factor in the educational success of students in Taiwan who are learning English from an increasingly younger age.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the theoretical framework of the New Literacy Studies (Lankshear, 1998; Luke, 1995), which maintains that language and literacy has "no meaning–apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts" (Gee, 1996, p. 59). In particular, the study proposes a socio-ideological theory of language and literacy that, namely, incorporates and extends both Street's (1984) ideological model of literacy and Barton and Hamilton's (1998) social theory of literacy. Street's work (1984, 1993) reinforces the ideological aspects of literacy in relation to the political atmosphere of a country's local and national context, while Barton and Hamilton pay more attention to the consequences of the social and cultural dimensions of literacy.

Employing the socio-ideological perspective on language and literacy enables the view that an individual's language practices occur within the social and cultural milieu in which the individual finds himself, ever influenced by and interacting with the discourses that surround him/her. These include policy discourses at the supra-national level that impact not only how a language is to be defined, but also which languages are even discussed. A socio-ideological framework also better allows for an examination of the phenomenon of English in Taiwan as a part of the country's language dynamics that is intricately connected to the goal of internationalization and the pressure of globalization.

Methodology

Data sources for this research included six semi-structured focus group interviews with a total of 30 (16 female and 14 male) university and college students in Taiwan. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to explore
the breadth and range of views represented by the participants on the topic in question. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the official language of Taiwan and also the medium of instruction of the educational system, and hence, the language in which all participants would most likely feel comfortable communicating. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and then translated into English by the author. These focus group interviews were a part of the author's dissertation study, which aims to explore the English-language discourses, practices, and identities of university and college students in Taiwan.

Participants in the focus group interviews included university and college freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. These students have had at least six years of English language education in middle school and high school as the basis of their English-language knowledge and learning experiences. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling so that they represented diversity in terms of the kinds of colleges or universities they attend (e.g. public and private, comprehensive universities, teacher colleges, liberal arts colleges, universities of technology), their fields of study (e.g. humanities, finance, science), and their ethnicity (e.g. Southern Mins, Hakka, descendents of Mainlanders).

Data Analysis

Morse and Richards (2002) distinguish between three kinds of coding: descriptive coding, topic coding, and analytic coding. Data analysis for the focus group interviews began with topic coding. The topics were designated according to the categories previously used in designing the focus group interview protocol. These categories of information, were used as preliminary ways of understanding the data, as "at the beginning of a study the researcher is uncertain about what will ultimately be meaningful" (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). After this broad categorization of data, the author began to apply codes, using both open codes as well as "in vivo codes" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 118). The author then looked for patterns among the codes within and across each of the categories, seeking to identify themes. The research goal was to allow meaning to emerge from the data itself rather than to prescribe pre-set categories to it.

Findings and Discussion

Participants generally viewed the English language in very positive light. They recognized the prevalence of English in the world, and shared many examples of why English is important for them as individuals in terms of access to information and employment opportunities, and its link to the development of the nation. They also believed that the power of a language, in this case, English, is intricately linked to the economic and political power of a country, the United States, and how Mandarin Chinese, as a result of the growing economic power of China, is gradually becoming another powerful language in the world.

The primacy of English in the world is understood by participants as "a trend," something to be pursued and obtained, rather than resisted. That is, they did not see the prevalence of English in the world as a form of dominance, but rather, with the exception of a few, they embraced English for its
connotations of status and development, both for the individual (i.e. employment opportunities) and the nation (i.e. internationalization). The hegemony of English internalized by the participants reflects an "uncritical perception that it has achieved supreme global status" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 16).

Tai-yu was seen as a language of the elderly people and of southern and rural Taiwan. Though the participants recognized it as part of the Taiwanese culture and Taiwanese lives, the possible extinction of Tai-yu or other Taiwanese languages did not seem to disturb them. They talked about it as if it were only a matter of historical inevitability. Here is another case where "the preeminent position of English" may "contribute[e] to the death of indigenous languages" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 9).

Participants did not seem to be cognizant of the political and practical implications of awarding a language "official status." None of them expressed dissatisfaction that English, a foreign language, has been considered for official status over Taiwanese languages. Rather, Tai-yu, a majority mother tongue, was deemed as not qualified because it was a local language without a written system. Official language status, as the participants seemed to understand it, was reserved for a language that is widely recognized and used by the international community. That is, only a language that is powerful enough deserves such standing.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) explains how this might have happened. She points out that through formal education, people may end up "believing that their language is not as useful or developed as the dominant language and that they help their future children best by speaking the dominant language to them" (p. 24), or in the case of the participants, learning the language themselves. Again, this is an example of the extent to which the current impact of global English has contributed to how local languages are conceptualized and even rendered restrictive.

Hall and Eggington (2000) ask, "Is it possible for the vastly culturally and linguistically diverse populations of the world to develop English as a common first, second (or third...) language, and if so, at what cost to factors such as societies and individuals as well as to cultural and linguistic diversity?" (p. 5). This study has shown that it is not only possible, but English is on the fast track to becoming a common language, even in a country where it is a foreign language. English was understood by the participants as a ticket to opportunities and a link to the world beyond Taiwan, as well as an important factor in developing Taiwan's international competitiveness. Participants also revealed an acute consciousness of how English, as the language of the world powers, is a language from which they cannot escape.

This study documents the hegemony of English in Taiwan, as evidenced by how "the supremacy of English is often unquestioned, taken to be an obvious matter of common sense" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 16) by Taiwanese university and college students. The study also illustrates how the global spread of English may have shaped the ways that languages are conceptualized, having more intrinsic value when it is more widely recognized and understood, and marginalizing local
languages as it gains prominence.

Implications

The findings of this research have implications for both the study of global English, and for the profession of English language teaching. Borrowing from Phillipson's (1992) distinction between "core" and "periphery" English-speaking countries, Tollefson (2000) further distinguishes between "periphery countries in which English is used for internal purposes and those in which it is used only for international communication" (p. 13). As in the latter case, countries such as Japan (the example given by Tollefson) and Taiwan have been categorized as places wherein English "is primarily associated with international government and business, as well as with access to popular culture" yet "not a central basis for deciding who has access to economic resources and political power" (p. 13). This study has shown, however, that this categorization of Taiwan, and perhaps many other East Asian countries, may no longer be appropriate, as English is not only strongly linked to economic resources, it is increasingly used for internal purposes in "major institutions such as government, education, and media" (p. 12). As a result of the global spread of English and the infiltration of English in a variety of domains even in EFL countries, previous frameworks for analyzing English and categorizing English-speaking peoples may need to be revised.

Hall and Eggington (2000) remind English language educators that "the political, cultural, and social dimensions of English language teaching are embedded in each and every decision" (p. 1), and thus, warrant explicit attention. In a country such as Taiwan where professors and parents alike emphasize to their children the importance and value of English in their careers and in their lives, what then should be the responsibilities of English-language educators? Should English language teaching simply transmit the English language system, or should it include discussions of "linguistic human rights" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 25)? Shouldn't the English language curriculum also include conversations of the impact of global English on the fate and language "rights" of minority and regional languages?

What are the language obligations of native English language speakers? Are they to maintain the prevalence of English, perhaps by encouraging its official language status, or by accepting the different varieties of English worldwide? Perhaps it is the responsibility of all English speakers, including native speakers and English language learners, to maintain the dignity and existence of minority languages around the world, particularly their own languages in order to avoid their extinction. It is a matter of urgency, for the ever-increasing English language speaking, teaching, and learning communities worldwide, to recognize that their language obligations are as pertinent as the claim to "language rights." I submit that such obligations extend to all language users to contribute to the preservation of the languages of others, particularly minority languages and those on the brink of extinction.
Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it contributes a description of one dimension of the current linguistic situation in Taiwan. It draws attention to a politically vulnerable nation whose complex international and local situations can contribute to an understanding of how global and local forces influence not only a nation's language education agenda but also how learners make sense of languages in their lives, both foreign as well as mother tongue languages. In addition, this study is potentially significant in that it offers educators, curriculum makers, and policy makers in Taiwan further insights into a dimension of university and college students' perspectives. Most importantly, the study highlights the voices of students, the very people at the center of the learning process. This study is an attempt to answer Gee, Hull, and Lankshear's (1996) appeal for researchers and educators to "confront directly, at a fundamental level [...] the nature of language, learning, and literacy in and out of school" (p. 158).

Limitations and Agenda for Future Research

As with most qualitative research, the main limitation of this study lies in the fact that the researcher is the "primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 42), which implies that it is largely dependent upon the researcher's ability to elicit participant responses, and also on participants' enthusiasm to share their perspectives and their willingness to allow the researcher into their lives.

Bearing this in mind, one possible direction for future research is to conduct longitudinal qualitative studies that follow students over a period of time, interviewing them at different stages of their English education. This not only allows better mutual understanding between participants and researchers, but also offers insights into how global and local changes over time influence the global status of English and hence, attitudes of English language learners. Another possible direction for future research is to gain understanding of English language teachers' perspectives toward their roles as English language teachers in relation to the global spread of English.

References


