LANGUAGE POLICY IN TAIWAN: AGE AS A FACTOR OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Pei-Ying Lee
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LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE POLICY IN TAIWAN: AGE AS A FACTOR OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by

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Master of Arts in Teaching International Languages

California State University, Chico

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Age has been viewed as the most important factor of language acquisition in Taiwan, and it is also used as a slogan to attract parents to send their children to learn English at an earlier age. The theory of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) leads parents to believe that children should learn English as soon as possible or lose their advantages. Other factors such as motivation and environment have been ignored in considerations of language acquisition in Taiwan. Proponents of the CPH have argued that children who acquire a second language earlier can obtain native-like accents, but opponents stress that children perform better in second language acquisition once they already acquire their first language.

In the last ten years, English language policy has been changed and revised, especially the official starting age of learning English in Taiwan. Before 2001, English
was officially taught in seventh grade. Due to a high demand from the public, the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to offer English instruction in the elementary schools. Related to the issues of English language policy in Taiwan are unqualified teachers, limited class time, inconsistent curriculum, limited teacher training and resources for rural areas. It is important to help children establish interests in learning English and the government should provide alternate ways for public to access English education, such as television program on public television service and internet resources.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

When my Taiwanese friends and relatives hear about my major, these are the first questions they ask: “Should I send my children to learn English? Is it true that the earlier they start, the better they will learn English? Is my six-year-old too late in starting to learn English?” All of these questions lead to an important issue—age. When children start to learn English later than others, parents are afraid that their children will fall behind in acquiring English.

Age should not be the only issue parents are concerned about. There are other variables in learning English, such as motivation and environment for example. In Taiwan, English is not children’s first language, so they do not have an opportunity to practice outside the classroom setting. The surrounding environment makes it difficult for young children to acquire English, because children use their first language (Mandarin and/or Taiwanese) most of time. Parents send their children to kindergartens to learn English and Mandarin in a school setting, but most children do not practice English at home.

According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Education’s (MOE) proposal, the kindergartens would not be able to enroll any new children or would have their licenses revoked if they chose to offer full-time English classes to children under age six. This
proposal stirred up a huge debate on the dichotomy between younger and older learners of English. However, the then-Minister of Education, Jung-Tsun Huang, said that the standards for language courses in kindergarten are to be confined to the national language (Mandarin Chinese) and the mother tongues of the parents’ (for example: Taiwanese and Hakka). Because the main focus of kindergarten education is health, games, music, cognition, language and common sense (math and science), language is only of these six major fields. The curriculum of kindergarten should not focus only on languages. The official also insisted that forcing children under six years old to learn English would result in confusion with the mother tongue and create an identity crisis between the local and foreign culture (China Post Staff, 2004).

During the past 10 years, the English language policy in Taiwan has been changed often, especially the official starting point for students learning English at school. The general guidelines for the Grade 1-9 curriculum for elementary and junior high schools states that students will start learning English in grade 5 instead of grade 7 in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2000). In 2003, the grade for starting the English curriculum was lowered to Grade 3 (Butler, 2004). Because of this change in policy, parents are sending children to bilingual or whole English kindergartens in order to outperform other students. However, the law related to kindergarten education specified that it is illegal to teach children a language other than Mandarin. Some kindergartens want to teach children English in order to meet parents’ expectations. They are not listed as kindergartens; instead, they are listed as cram schools. The law related to kindergarten education specifies rules regarding standards for meeting children’s physical and educational needs.
Age has been viewed as a critical factor in second language acquisition. Most people think that the younger learners are when they start to learn a language, the better the results they can achieve in the second language. But researchers have divergent viewpoints on this issue (Scovel, 1969; Krashen, 1973; Lamendella, 1977; Collier, 1987; Flege, Yeni-Komshian & Liu, 1999). Most journal articles or books focus on one side of the argument. For example, most common argument is that the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is well researched in first language acquisition, but not in second language acquisition. Some studies have shown that adult learners do better in certain areas, such as syntax and morphology (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978; Ioup, Boustagui, Tigi & Moselle, 1994; Singleton, 1995), and younger learners are better in pronunciation (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Long, 1990). But the question still remains unanswered, and parents are still wondering what age is the best time to start. Different researchers (Collier, 1987; Patkowski, 1980; Long, 1990) have suggested various optimal ages for starting to learn a second language. Not surprisingly, parents question whether their children should start to learn a second language at different ages in order to achieve better English proficiency.

Statement of Problem

For many years, Taiwanese parents have been asking themselves what the best time is for children to learn English. Adding to the confusion are advertisements asserting that children should begin English as young as possible or risk failure to achieve a high level of proficiency. As a result, many parents send their children to cram schools or kindergartens that offer an English curriculum. Children as young as three years-old are
now learning English in school-like settings, such as cram schools. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan wants to prevent some kindergartens from acting as cram schools teaching English to young children, and plans to change the language policy to prohibit the teaching of English in kindergartens. But parents are opposed to this proposal; they do not want their children behind in learning English, and the policy contradicts their belief that early language learning is better. If the policy continues to fuel the debate, how many children will become the victims of this language policy?

Another problem relates to the methods or approaches that educators use to teach English to young children. Most methods now in use completely ignore children’s physical and cognitive development. Because of the parents’ desire to see and hear their children speak English, teachers are being pressured to teach children content that shows immediate but limited results, such as the drilling of slogans or songs. With this kind of instruction, children become a memory machine and start losing interest in learning English. Also, quick results in speaking English are not the same as fluent proficiency. Most parents want their children to learn English from native English speakers, but they never care to ask about native speakers’ qualifications for teaching young children. Children should have fun when they are immersed in other languages, rather than merely being subjected to memorizing songs or vocabulary.

Statement of Need

In Taiwan, children have little or no opportunity to use English in daily life or outside of the classroom setting. Most parents truly believe that children should have full access to speaking/reading/listening English. English immersion kindergartens create an
environment that can potentially provide children a place to practice their English with input from teachers (native English speakers). As a result, parents fall into the trap of viewing immersion English kindergartens as the best way to learn English. They do not have enough information to evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of teaching young learners only in English and not in Mandarin. This thesis will serve as a source of information for educators, parents, and policy makers interested in better understanding how children learn a second language and how they can help ease children’s transition to the second language.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether early exposure to a foreign language is better than later exposure. What benefits do children derive from early exposure? Are there risks in early exposure? Does it have any negative consequences on children’s development? The results could help policy makers in Taiwan to develop a clearer picture of how to change policy and promote positive outcomes in foreign language learning. Hopefully, this study can help improve the quality of early childhood education in Taiwan, and this will foster better results as children get older.

This study is intended to inform people who are interested in this topic by providing a better understanding of the process of second language acquisition and what researchers have found in examining the age factor in language learning. I want to transform the findings from previous research into recommendations for stakeholders, teachers, parents, administrators and policy makers to read, and present the data in a way that synthesizes findings from previous studies.
Research Questions

How do researchers define the Critical Period Hypothesis? What are the arguments from both proponents and opponents of Critical Period Hypothesis? Besides age, what other factors influence children’s second language acquisition? Does early exposure affect children’s acquisition of the target language? If it does, to what extent and in what contexts is the effect positive or negative?

For young children exposed to a “no Mandarin, only English” kindergarten environment, where are the consequences on development of both the first and second language? To what extent and in what contexts is the effect positive or negative? What about young children in other kindergartens?

How did immersion programs start? What is the purpose of immersion programs in Canada? What is the purpose of immersion programs in Taiwan? What is the effect of immersion kindergartens on children in Taiwan? For Taiwanese children whose first language is not Mandarin, what is involved in transitioning from their home language to an academic language in elementary school?

What are the basic features or characteristics of the educational system in Taiwan? What is English education in Taiwan? What is the language policy in Taiwan? Based on research, is this an appropriate language policy for younger children?

Limitations

I am doing this study in the United States, so I am not able to conduct research for the study in Taiwan. I have to use information from the Internet to access the latest information on language policy. I am not able to gather data or information directly from
schools in Taiwan, but I have made an effort to gather data from other countries for comparison to the situation in Taiwan.

Definition of Terms

Cram Schools

The private supplementary schools prepare students for entrance examinations of the senior high school and university. Others specialize on foreign language instruction and prepare students for the examinations required to study abroad (Taiwan Yearbook, 2006).

Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)

The period between early childhood and puberty during which a child can acquire language without instruction. During this period, language learning proceeds easily, swiftly, and without external intervention. After this period, the acquisition of the grammar is difficult and, for some individuals, never fully achieved. (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 524)

Morphology

“The study of the structure of words; the components of the grammar that includes the rules of word formation” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 531).

Phonology

The sound system of a language; the component of a grammar that includes the inventory of sounds (phonetic and phonemic units) and rules of their combination and pronunciation; the study of the sound systems of all languages. (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 533)

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The learning of another language after the first language has been learned (Gass & Selinker, 2001).
Overview of Chapters

In Chapter I, the researcher provides an overview of the Critical Period Hypothesis in second language acquisition, highlighting problems and issues related to English language policy in Taiwan. In Chapter II, the researcher reviews relevant research studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis, including the findings cited by both sides of the argument. The researcher also examines literature on the factors that affect second language acquisition: age, environment and affective variables. In Chapter III, the researcher describes immersion programs around the world and developments since the first immersion programs were initiated in Canada and Taiwan. In Chapter IV, the researcher investigates the current English language policy issues in Taiwan and how the government is handling the situation. Finally, the researcher concludes by presenting the findings and offering recommendations for future research in Chapter V.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW ON AGE AS A FACTOR OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

This chapter reviews studies that investigate the critical period in second language learning. The studies include research cited by both proponents and opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis. The researcher also examines different variables that have been linked to age factors in second language acquisition: the natural decrease in learning ability with age, environmental and affective factors. Age is the variable that receives considerable attention in second language acquisition research. It is a more simple and clear measure than other variables, such as motivation and aptitude. The result of age factor has two variables: route and rate/success of acquiring second language.

Lightbown and Spada (1993) concluded that there was no difference in the path of second language acquisition between children and adults, but age was a major indicator of rate/success of second language acquisition.

Definition of Critical Period Hypothesis

There are various definitions of the critical period in the research. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) describe the critical period at or before puberty when learning a language is easier and more successful. Learners are less likely to achieve
native-like performance after puberty. Ioup’s (2005) defined the critical period as “abrupt closure.” meaning that learners cannot achieve certain levels of performance after the critical period. But the term sensitive period has also been used interchangeably with critical period. Ioup (2005) describes the sensitive period as a gradual decline in ability. Learning languages can be divided into two scenarios: ongoing learning and learning that stops after the critical/sensitive period. The definition of “sensitive period” is closer to my own point of view, but I will use the term “critical period” throughout this thesis, because it has been more widely used over the years. All researchers use puberty to distinguish the period between more or less successful language learning. The research findings vary as to the exact age of closure.

Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) on Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

In the last three decades, researchers have linked second language acquisition with age factors because of the assumption that brain development in the area of language learning is complete after a certain age. Such studies have influenced decisions in foreign language policy to push the learning age earlier (Flege et al., 1999). Penfield was the first researcher to make a connection between foreign language learning and brain development (Penfield & Roberts, 1959). He found that after accidents, children were able to get their speech ability back more quickly than the adults with the same injury or damage to the left hemisphere known as the area of dominant language ability. Because children had an easier time transferring from the damaged to the undamaged hemisphere, they could recover more quickly. Taking the position that “the earlier, the better,” he claimed that children could acquire language more easily before the age of nine because
of the plasticity of brain. The plasticity will subsequently be lost after the age of nine. The brain loses plasticity as both hemispheres work in isolation from each other, and the area of language learning is then solely on the left hemisphere.

A few years later, Lenneberg (1967) looked at Penfield’s statement, “the earlier, the better,” from a psycholinguistic perspective and set up experiments to examine the relationship between maturational constraints and age factors. In his study, Lenneberg (1967) found that if the injury occurs in the right hemisphere, adults had more problems in the language area than children. In the case of after-surgery patients, children had fewer problems recovering from the surgery than adults. Adults often ended up almost lost in language. From the results of his studies, he concluded that it was different between adults and children on the neurological basis of language. His definition of Critical Period Hypothesis was beginning from two to around puberty. This period was the same as the lateralization process that specialized language function in the brain. Both Penfield and Roberts’ (1959) and Lenneberg’s (1967) studies were based on brain-injured patients’ clinical observations, especially on their language patterns while in the recovery period.

Scovel (1969) claimed that the CPH (Critical Period Hypothesis) influences mostly the speech area (which is usually defined as accent), but that it did not affect other areas of language (such as morphology). However, Krashen (1973) reported the cut-off age as five years old. Learning after this point would be difficult, as the period affected the areas of morphology, syntax and pragmatics. Lamendella (1977) used “sensitive period”, a term that was originally used in first language acquisition and now moved into the second language context. Lamendella emphasized the fact that young children might
have advantages of efficiency in language acquisition, but older learners were not unable to achieve certain proficiency as well.

When it comes to the CPH in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), it is important to examine the key components that help us define the term. These components include the clear beginning and ending point of the CPH, a decrease in performance at the end of this period, qualitative evidence to differentiate the learning results inside and outside of the CPH, and finally the role that the environment may play within the CPH (Hakuta, 2001).

Studies about Critical Period Hypothesis

Proponents

Most bilingual preschools and kindergartens in Taiwan use “younger=better” to persuade parents to let their children learn English at a very young age. Some of the research data and claims are addressed in this section. Collier (1987) has suggested that age 8-11 is the fastest and most effective period for achieving academic proficiency for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students in the United States. No matter the age at which children start learning, Collier found that LEP students need at least 4-8 years to reach the proficiency level of native speakers in all subject areas. From personal experience, it took me several months to understand lectures in the university classroom, and I studied English for over 15 years in Taiwan. Students at ages 8-11 would be considered older learners in Taiwan, because most parents send their children to cram schools or bilingual programs at a very young age, such as four or five years old.
In the earlier studies, most researchers used the immigrants’ age at arrival as the variable to test the claim of Critical Period Hypothesis. In a study by Patkowski (1980), 67 immigrants who came to the United States at various ages were examined to test the relationship between age at arrival and syntactic proficiency. Because of his personal experience, the researcher used the arrival of age 15 to separate the subjects into two groups, pre- and post-puberty. A questionnaire was administered to find out participants’ linguistic, educational, and professional information. The tool to determine their syntactic proficiency was a language proficiency interview test from the Foreign Service Institute. The interviews lasted from 25-35 minutes and were taped for research purposes. After each interview, part of the taped interview was transformed into a written transcript for two native speakers to evaluate. According Patkowski’s (1980) findings, the age of arrival is a strong predictor of syntactic proficiency. No significant findings were found for other variables such as length of residence in United States, informal English exposure, or formal English instruction.

Most researchers claim that younger learners could more likely achieve native-like accent and fluency as native speakers. Long (1990) stated that children should start learning a second language by age 6 and no later than age 12. He said that children’s ability to accomplish a native-like accent will begin to vanish by age 6, and no matter how hard they try or how much help they get from teachers, they would never be able to use the language as native speakers. Those who want to achieve native-like morphology or syntax should start by age 15. Older learners have already acquired a first language; they are able to acquire the morphology and syntax of a second language more quickly than younger learners. But Long (1990) has suggested that faster learning processes do
not mean that the older learners would perform better than younger learners. Long found that this happens in both first and second language situations. Older learners still suffer from the syndrome Johnson and Newport (1989) described in the “maturational state hypothesis”: the ability to develop language is programmed for use during a certain stage. Whether or not it is used, the ability will decrease or vanish at a definite age.

Flege et al. collected the recordings and grammar judgment tests of 240 Korean immigrants who arrived at various ages and lived in the United States for an average of 15 years. The researchers used 21 English sentence components with various English consonants and vowels, and asked the participants to repeat them twice to be recorded. Assigned listeners (24 native speakers of English) judged the recordings using a scale from 1-9, ranging from strong to no foreign accent. The grammatical judgment test was 144 items that included nine sets of sentences to test on different rules of morphology and syntax of English. Seventy-seven sentences were grammatically correct; the other half of the test had some ungrammatical sentences and incorrect morphemes. The results showed a positive correlation between arrival of age and a foreign accent. However, the results of a grammatical judgment test show a negative correlation between arrival age and scores on the test. In this study, the researchers used a subgroup that controlled for the variables of education received in the United States, length of stay and usage of English and Korean to test on the differences of arrival ages. Participants with a later arrival age (average=16.6 years) showed a significantly stronger accent than earlier arrivals subgroups (average=9.7 years).

Generally speaking, people think that older learners will perform better in the grammatical area of language acquisition, but Slavoff and Johnson (1995) conducted a
study that challenges this common assumption in language learning. They found that both older and younger learners develop learning paths in grammar with a similar rate of development. This is a surprising fact, as older learners have been exposed to more grammatical rules and structures, and should do better than younger learners in this category. The most controversial problem involves the testing of skills in favor of older learners, and previous studies failed to control for this variable. Researchers cannot expect younger children to take a pen/pencil to complete a test, and it is unreasonable for very young learners to sit in the classroom to take tests.

**Opposition**

Most people do not believe in “older is better in learning a second language” However, they do not know that researchers have evidence to support this idea. Children may not have all of the advantages in learning a second language. Older learners have acquired their first language and experienced processing learning in first language. In their review of literature, Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) stated that older learners have the advantage of learning a second language at a higher level. They also said that many researchers accept arguments underlying the CPH and think that it should apply to second language acquisition as well. They argue that the process of learning a second language is different from acquiring the first language.

Older learners have the advantage of comparing both their first and second languages, finding similarities and differences that help in learning another language. Faster first language acquisition also favors learning a second language more quickly than others. In a case study by Ioup et al. (1994), the participant’s mother stated that her daughter could speak whole sentences in her first language when she was 18 months old
and could imitate by listening to the radio. These researchers claimed that her aptitude in acquiring the first language could predict her success in learning a second language at an older age. Furthermore, her ways of managing memory and her ability connecting sounds with phonemes in language learning were more advanced than those of other children. They used her as an example to prove that older learners with better learning characteristics could reach native-like proficiency and should not stop learning just because they passed the sensitive period.

When Singleton (1995) examined the relationship between CPH and second language acquisition, he chose subjects who started to learn French before and after age 12. The French C-test was used to test subjects’ vocabulary performance. It includes filling in words that were left out intentionally, so that subjects needed to have enough knowledge to finish the tasks. He used the results from observations and previous research to support his conclusion that there are no significant findings that starting language learning early would develop more native-like proficiency. He said that age is only one of the variables that affect language learning. He also didn’t agree with researchers that have overgeneralized experimental evidence into statements of “younger=better in all circumstances over any timescale” (p. 4). It only represents one side of the story in favor of professionals who want to promote the idea that younger children learn a second language better.

The advantages adults have in learning languages are the maturity of cognitive and learning experiences and their schematic knowledge. As an example, Scovel (2000) chose the word transportation and asked children what it meant. The children came up with answers of “choo choo train” or making noises like airplanes flying. Adults know
the schema of transportation, so they would apply the concept to decode this word and use it to help remember new words in the second language. The author also makes the claim that children are better language learners should be restricted only in one of the linguistic skills: native-like pronunciation. Pronunciation is not viewed as an important factor in learning language and becoming bilingual.

In one study, Snow et al. (1978) used native speakers of English learning Dutch in Holland as subjects. The two groups of subjects were beginners (just start learning Dutch) and advanced (already living and speaking Dutch at least 18 months). In the groups of beginning learners, the ages of subjects were 3-5, 6-7, 8-10, 12-15 years old and adults. The advanced learners were 6-7, 8-10, 12-15 years old and adults. Beginners were tested three times, and advanced learners were only tested once. The subjects were tested on pronunciation, auditory discrimination, morphology, sentence repetition/translation/judgment, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, story comprehension, and storytelling. In their findings, the group of 3-5 year olds scored consistently lower than subjects in the older groups on all tests. The 12-15 years-olds presented the fastest acquisition in all of the skills that were tested. The authors concluded that these findings helped reject the hypothesis that the optimal period for learning language is from age 2 to 12.

Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) used U.S. census data from 1999 to analyze responses of immigrants whose native languages were speaking of Spanish and Chinese because these languages have a different structure than English. The census forms asked the participants to self-describe their ability into categories from not at all, not well, well, very well and speak only English. The forms also had additional questions
to gather information for testing the Critical Period Hypothesis: for example, age, year of arrival in the United States and educational background. The results showed that there was no evidence of discontinuity in learning language ability. The researchers found that the ability to acquire a second language would decline steadily as learners get older.

Other Factors in the Critical Period Hypothesis

Environmental and Social Factors

Marinova-Todd et al. found that an important component in a successful second language experience is the environment. When second language learners study the target language in an environment with native speakers of that language, the results are dramatically higher than learning the language only in the classroom. For example, I was struggling to improve my scores in the listening class of a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) program. The teacher wanted me to practice listening by listening to practice tapes and remembering the sentences. It was frustrating because I never remembered the sentences. The teacher wanted me to repeat the sentences I heard, and I could not repeat complete sentences after listening the tape several times. Because I never understood the tape, I thought I would never succeed in listening.

When I had the privilege of coming to the United States, an English-speaking country, to study in the language institute, everything changed. I soon realized that everything around me was in English. I learned from looking at everything, such as menus in the cafeteria, signs in the streets, and conversations with friends. Everything I heard was in English, so my listening skills improved dramatically. I had difficulty with listening comprehension prior to coming to United States. McCall and Plemons (2001)
found the critical factor to decide if adults could learn a second language well is the degree of immersing in the environment. The starting age became less important, although starting earlier may be better and more efficient. In Taiwan, students’ English competence is closely related to socioeconomic status because higher socioeconomic status equals better chances to receive English education. Parents would provide children with opportunities to use English at home, and children would have more chances to practice what they have learned in schools.

Lightbown (2000) questioned the relevance of CPH In the foreign language classroom environment, because finding individuals who master a foreign language is rare, whether the starting age is early or late. In instructional settings, Lightbown reported that the intensity of instruction and continuing exposure to the target language are more important than the age at which instruction begins. With high intensity instruction, learners can also achieve a high level of proficiency. With my own learning experiences at the American Language and Cultural Institute (ALCI) on campus, the intensity of instruction really helped me achieve the level of listening I needed to pass the entrance test TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) for admission to California State University, Chico’s undergraduate program. Though I had spent considerable time preparing for the test, I was struggling to bring my scores up. Lack of contact with the language outside the classroom did not help with acquisition because the surrounding environment did not reinforce the content learned in the classroom.

**Affective Factors**

Whether students are young or old, the most important and influential factors are aptitude and motivation. Gardner (1985) defined motivation as “the combination of
effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10). Four elements of motivation include the goal, behavior with effort, desire to reach the goal, and attitude toward the activity of learning (Gardner, 1985).

With respect to aptitude, the three variables that influence students’ learning of a foreign language are age, type of exposure to the language, and how linguistically different the native and foreign languages are (Research Points, 2006). Characteristics that influence attitudes toward learning are affective factors that include motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence. In the earlier studies, these factors have been used to hypothesize the differences in language acquisition between adults and children (Twyford, 1987/1988). For example, adults have higher extrinsic motivation in learning languages because they want to pursue a better job or earn more money. While children may have lower extrinsic motivation, they have a higher intrinsic motivation to work with their peers in natural language acquisition settings (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Gardner (1985) asserted that there are two types of motivation, integrative and instrumental. He defined integrative motivation as learners’ desires to incorporate with the community of the target language they are currently learning. Instrumental motivation means that rewards and positive outcomes might accompany learning. In Taiwan, the issue is that students do not have outside reinforcement for using English. This affects students’ motivation to learn more in order to understand English, and their willingness to learn from what they hear or see. Previous studies showed that the success of students’ learning a second or foreign language was determined by the degree of motivation (Gardner, 1985; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).
The level of anxiety could determine the degree of ease and performance in learning language. Adults tend to have more difficulty learning because of higher anxiety resulting from the fear of failing to perform in front of their peers (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). Adults are more self-conscious about their performance than children, but younger learners also experience language anxiety. However, after interviewing fifth grade students and teachers in Taipei County, Chan and Wu (2004) identified five factors in language anxiety. The factors were “low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, competition of games, anxious personality, and pressure from students themselves and their parents” (p. 288). The researchers also reported that the results of elementary students’ English learning anxiety were obvious and needed attention from teachers and parents. However, this study showed that teachers were not aware of students’ anxiety and its influence on learning of English.

Summary

Age is the most discussed and debatable topic in second language acquisition. Proponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis believe that children learning a second language while young could attain an accent approaching that of a native speaker. Opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis noted that children could reach a higher level of proficiency in morphology. Age is not the only factor in the Critical Period Hypothesis; environment and affective factors also influence in learning of second language acquisition.
CHAPTER III

OVERVIEW AND MODELS OF IMMERSION PROGRAMS

In Taiwan, the ways children acquire English include tutoring by tutors or nannies from the Philippines or Indonesia who can speak some English, attending cram schools, purchasing self-study curriculum, watching videos/DVDs of English programs, and attending English immersion programs. Parents with higher education backgrounds teach children themselves and use curriculum from other English-speaking countries. The most popular schools for teaching children English in Taiwan are English immersion kindergartens, but they also raise the most debated issues for parents who have kindergarten-aged children.

The first immersion program was developed in the mid-1960s in Quebec. Parents wanted to help their children in acquiring French as their second language in Quebec (Swain & Johnson, 1997). French is the official language in Quebec, but English speakers are still the majority of population. The parents of the St. Lambert area proposed a new form of teaching French as a second language, and the program offered French instruction in kindergarten. Children are first taught to read in French. When children enter second grade, literacy curriculum is taught through other subjects. By sixth grade, half of the curriculum is in English and the other half is in French. The late 1960s was a
period in which people realized that French had unique value in the area of politics, economics and society (Swain & Johnson, 1997).

**Definition of Immersion Programs**

Genesee (1987) defined immersion as “a form of bilingual education in which students who speak the language of the majority of the population receive part of their instruction through the medium of a second language and part through their first language” (p. 1). Both languages are used as a tool in the curriculum to teach class subjects such as mathematics, sciences, and physical education. The subjects are not taught by using both languages at the same time. In order to be referred to as an immersion program, the curriculum needs to consist of at least 50 percent of instruction taught in second language (Genesee, 1987). Immersion programs typically start with instruction in the target language (second language), and then introduce literacy step by step, using the first language for instruction.

**Origins of Immersion Programs**

Children in the immersion programs in Canada start to learn French from kindergarten to first grade, and English is introduced beginning in the second grade. Instruction in fifth and sixth grades is half in English and half in French (Swain & Johnson, 1997). After the success of immersion programs in Canada, similar programs spread around the world and in the foreign language context. Immersion programs are used to promote minority languages in former colonial countries (Swain & Johnson, 1997). In the United States, Culver City was first in replicating the Canadian model of immersion programs in 1971. Spanish was the medium of instruction for students in
Culver City, and the program was categorized as early partial immersion. Because of the location of Culver City in Southern California, Spanish was used in the area by much of the population. During kindergarten and first grade, the Culver City immersion program used Spanish as the medium of instruction. Until second grade, English was introduced in the language arts. Bilingual Spanish and English teachers teach both languages, and they are never mixed in the same class period from second grades (Genesee, 1987). French is the other language of immersion programs in the United States. Montgomery County, Maryland, and Holliston, Massachusetts had French immersion programs, even though there were no residents speaking French in these areas. French was used for instruction from kindergarten to second grade, but only physical education and music were taught in English. From third grade on, English was introduced as a language arts class in the curriculum (Genesee, 1987).

**Types of Immersion Programs**

Immersion programs can be divided into two types: total and partial immersion. The partial immersion program is divided into early partial immersion, mid-immersion, and late immersion program, depending on the starting grade levels and amount of time for instruction in the second language. The most popular model is early total immersion. In this model, curriculum is totally taught in the second language for one to three years before first language is used in class. Because of worries about children’s first language development, some immersion programs are designed to teach children half in the first language and half in the second/foreign language. The difference between mid- and late immersion programs is the starting time. Fourth or fifth graders start
learning a second/foreign language in the mid-immersion program, and students in the late immersion programs start in the sixth or seventh grades or at the beginning of secondary school. The late immersion programs provide all or most of the curriculum in the second language for one year (Swain & Johnson, 1997).

**Core Features of Immersion Programs**

In terms of social context, curriculum, pedagogy, teacher and student characteristics, Swain and Johnson (1997) defined immersion programs in eight core features. Eight core features of immersion programs include a second language as a medium of instruction, parallels with curriculum in the first language, support for the first language, goal of additive bilingualism, exposure to a second language environment, curriculum that matches students’ needs and proficiency, bilingual teachers and their basic knowledge of local culture (Swain & Johnson, 1997). The most distinctive feature of immersion programs is that teachers use a second language to teach and communicate with students. The second language is not just one of the subjects in the curriculum. In the immersion programs, teachers use a second language to teach subjects like mathematics, science, and geography. If students’ proficiency in the second language is not as good as the first language, students might not study easily and use the first language to learn the subjects. The first language is not completely ignored in immersion programs. It is often used as a tool to get across ideas between students and teachers. The second language is not trying to replace the first language while students are learning. Teachers are bilingual and fluent in both the first and second languages that serve as the mediums of instruction in immersion programs (Swain & Johnson, 1997).
Continuity is the most important issue to consider because programs need to have an overall plan to link the different stages. Children have various needs at the different stages of language learning, and they might want to leave immersion programs at some points. In Taiwan, English instruction in immersion programs decreases from kindergarten to elementary school. Swain and Johnson (1997) asserted that issues of program articulation could be a problem as students move into a higher levels. Teacher training and additional resources are needed to improve the curriculum and develop materials for students.

Swain and Johnson (1997) warned teachers and parents about attitudes towards the culture of second language, because people are not aware that culture and language should not be separated. Learning a language is also learning a culture, and culture can help students understand how the language is used in certain situations. Parents want students to achieve a high level of English proficiency, but they are reluctant to let children learn the culture of English. Children only know about the holidays and special occasions Americans celebrate, but they do not know why they celebrate. Immersion programs in Taiwan want to show parents how they teach children, so they use American holidays that are famous to create presentations and let children perform in English.

Immersion Kindergarten in Taiwan

Swain and Johnson (1997) stated that “foreign languages are not used within the community, but there is an identifiable community and culture elsewhere that establishes the target for the immersion programs” (p. 17). English is a foreign language
in Taiwan, and it is not used in daily activity and the surrounding environment. Most immersion kindergartens in Taiwan are privately owned and sometimes are categorized as language institutions instead of regular kindergartens. The programs are more structured, teacher centered, and utilize a lot of pencil and paper activities. The English immersion programs in Taiwan are categorized as early partial immersion programs, and they target children age three to seven. Because of the age of the children, the curriculum needs to be adjusted to accommodate their needs. Teachers use imperative sentences to enforce manners, handle discipline, check for picture recognition, and for singing and dancing in the classroom.

Taiwanese immersion programs provide children with a 100 percent English curriculum in kindergarten. It is a different model compared with Canadian immersion programs because Taiwanese children speak different first languages at home. Children from Mandarin-speaking families enter the immersion kindergartens with Mandarin as their first language and English as a second language. This case is close to the model for the Canadian immersion programs. When children from Taiwanese-speaking families enter immersion kindergartens in Taiwan, on the other hand, they learn a foreign language (English) before learning the official language (Mandarin) of the elementary schools. Because kindergarten education is not compulsory in Taiwan, children learn the national language (Mandarin) officially in the first grade. Mandarin is the language used for academic work, except at a few specialized schools like Taipei American Schools/Victoria Academy (bilingual school from kindergarten to junior high). Teachers use Mandarin to teach all subjects in the regular elementary schools.
Since 1945, Mandarin has been the only official academic language used in Taiwan. However, other languages (e.g., Taiwanese, Hakka, aboriginal languages) are also spoken or used in people’s daily life. Sandel (2003) reported that Taiwanese is spoken by roughly 73% of the population in Taiwan, while 12% of the population uses Hakka as a first language and 2% has aboriginal primary languages. The remaining 13% of the population in Taiwan uses Mandarin as their first language. Thus, for 87% of the population, English is one of the two new languages introduced in the primary grades. From a culture standpoint, the transition to Mandarin does not represent a culture change for those who speak Mandarin and Taiwanese. These individuals constitute 86% of the population. As the emphasis in English instruction is on foreign language proficiency, the issues of cultural identity that arise in other societies are limited or non-existent in Taiwan. Tsao (1999) indicates that Mandarin is viewed as a higher status language as compared to Taiwanese, Hakka, or the aboriginal languages, which are lower status languages. This is due to the promotion of Mandarin as the national language in Taiwan after 1945.

There is no empirical research related to the influence of Taiwanese children’s first language on the acquisition of Mandarin as an academic language and English as a foreign language. There is also a lack of research on how children transition from the languages used at home to the two new languages many encounter at school. The children of Malaysia face a similar situation as Taiwanese children in their multicultural and multilingual society. Because Malaysia has three ethnic groups (e.g., Malay, Chinese and Indian) and languages (e.g., Bahasa Melaya, Mandarin, and Tamil), promoting one national language is also a challenge for Malaysians. Bahasa Melaya is the national
language of Malaysia, while Bahasa Melaya is used as an academic language from junior high school through the university. However, the children of Chinese and Indians can still practice their first languages in vernacular schools at the primary school level (David, 2007). Nunan (2003) describes English policy in Malaysia: children start to learn English officially from age 7 in Malay-medium elementary schools, and at age 9 in Mandarin-medium and Tamil-medium elementary schools. On average, Malaysian children receive 90 minutes of English instruction per week in elementary schools, and 4 hours per week in secondary schools. Unlike Taiwan, in Malaysia, English has been used to teach subjects such as math and science since 2003. In Taiwan, English is just one subject in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools. Starting in elementary schools, most Taiwanese children learn Mandarin and English. Their first language (Taiwanese, Hakka or other aboriginal languages) is included only as a subject in the curriculum. By contrast, Malaysian children can choose to enter elementary schools using their first language as the medium of instruction until junior high. The starting time for foreign language instruction is similar in both Malaysia and Taiwan, but Malaysian children can still develop proficiency in their first language throughout elementary school.

Taiwanese children whose first language is not Mandarin face a greater challenge in transitioning between the home language and academic language used in elementary schools. Some children might not speak any Mandarin before entering elementary school. Children in the English-only kindergartens learn English before the mandated official language-Mandarin. Children are not allowed to speak the language they use everyday (Mandarin/Taiwanese) in the classroom, and most of their teachers are native English speakers who do not speak Mandarin at all. In this case, children are going
through two transitions at the age of seven: from speaking Mandarin or Taiwanese at home to learn English in the kindergartens and then moving from an English-only environment to only Mandarin in elementary schools.

Because of the Ministry of Education’s restricted policy on teaching foreign languages to young children, English immersion programs cannot use the words “immersion” or “bilingual” to promote their programs. They only use the terms private kindergartens or language institutions. These institutions are not registered as preschools or kindergartens, so they are exempted from the 幼稚教育法 [the Preschool Education Law]. Chang (2003) has described how her daughter Hannah attended an English immersion kindergarten that had been licensed as cram school (supplementary). This program did not follow the regulations in the guidelines from 幼稚教育法 [the Preschool Education Law] which are designed to regulate health conditions regularly. Space for physical education is required in regular kindergartens, but English immersion kindergartens licensed as cram schools, are not required to provide space for children’s physical education. Because of expensive tuition, parents only pay attention to results showing that their children can speak fluent English. All other important things are being ignored. For example, regular eye and tooth check-up exams are given in kindergartens. If children have any health-related problems, parents will be notified so they can take their children to doctors for further exams.

Young children are sent into an English-only environment, and they are supposed to be immersed in speaking English as naturally as possible. Children are immersed in an English-speaking environment for three years, and parents hope that their
children can become fluent in English after three years in the immersion program. Because parents want to see immediate results, teachers implement a curriculum that makes it easier to showcase learning outcomes to parents as the program progresses. Chang (2003b) stated that English immersion kindergartens use curriculum and teaching materials from nearby English-speaking countries (Singapore and Malaysia), but the most important part—children’s needs—is ignored. For example, Chang’s daughter Hannah’s school used curriculum from Singapore, and the lessons contained lots of stories about the national heroes of Singapore. Children, parents, and teachers do not know the cultural background of these stories from Singapore. Stories of Singapore’s national heroes are neither relevant nor important to children in Taiwan, and teachers should understand that learning a foreign language equals learning the foreign culture.

Summary

After the first immersion program started in Canada, immersion programs were widely spread around the world. Because proficiency in English is in high demand in Taiwan, parents want their children to be immersed in the English environment as soon as possible. The curriculum of immersion programs should consist of 50 percent in the first language and 50 percent in the second language. Parents think that this kind of immersion program could supplement children’s lack interaction with English in the home environment. They also do not think that learning English early would influence children’s first language acquisition. The implication of the revised language policy for children from different language backgrounds has not been investigated. Taiwanese parents should understand that if children’s first language is not Mandarin, their
immersion in an English-only learning environment is not the same as the original Canadian. However, as parents are not experts on language learning, their opinions may not be the only input that government officials and policymakers are willing to consider.
CHAPTER IV

ISSUES AND CURRENT SITUATION OF
ENGLISH POLICY IN TAIWAN

More and more language policymakers around the world want children to learn English officially earlier, but they fail to consider other planning that accompany changes in policy, such as funding, curriculum and teachers (Nunan, 2003). Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) observed that teaching children English as a foreign language has become a huge and successful business. In China, parents send their children to cram schools to study English after school. It is the same situation in Taiwan. Recently in Taiwan, it is very common to observe young children learning English in kindergartens that are promoted as English-only learning environments with native English speakers as teachers. However, the Ministry of Education announced that teaching English only in preschools and kindergartens is against the law because it has violates 幼稚教育法 [the Preschool Education Law]. This law clearly states that the priority of kindergarten is to make sure young children develop physically and emotionally in an environment in which they can be safe and comfortable.

According to The Republic of China Yearbook -Taiwan (2001), the number of registered kindergartens has grown from 28 in 1950, to 3,005 in 1999. Fifty percent of these are for teaching English. Parents who choose a kindergarten with an English program will pay much more tuition than for ordinary kindergarten. It is natural that
parents want what is best for their children and those they are willing to pay more in tuition. Because of globalization and economic development, the need for English as a communication tool has increased rapidly in Taiwan. Both society and industry place high expectations on fluency in reading, writing, and speaking English. People with fluent English skills have better opportunities to get jobs and are more competitive than people who have the same academic backgrounds but limited English fluency (Su, 2005).

The Ministry of Education believes that it is not necessary to implement early English instruction. Because young children have not developed their analytical abilities, it is inefficient to teach English too early. The Ministry of Education reported that 17 out of 25 cities and counties have already begun to implement an English curriculum in the primary grades because of the high demand to learn it as soon as possible. One of the 17 cities and counties was Taipei City. Then-Director of the Taipei City Bureau of Education, Wu Ching-Chi, defends the decision to implement an English curriculum for first graders because of increased student interest in English. He also emphasized that the top priority was to teach Chinese, and the second was to stimulate students’ interest in learning English (Chang, 2003a).

The Educational System and English Education in Taiwan

In Taiwan, the current education system consists of basic, intermediate, advanced and returning education. Kindergartens, elementary and junior high schools fall into the category of basic education, which parallels K-12 education in the United States (Ministry of Education, 2006). The education system in Taiwan has both public and private schools throughout all levels, and the Ministry of Education mainly controls the
curriculum. The Constitution in Taiwan entitles all children to at least six years of education as a right, and the National Educational Act mandates that all children between six and fifteen years of age attend six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. Before reforms took place in the mid-1990s, the discrepancy in the curriculum between elementary and junior high schools was always the focus of discussion. Students had a difficult transition from elementary to junior high schools because curriculum of elementary and junior high schools did not have consistency to connect it together. The reasons for changes in the curriculum are national development needs and changing public expectations (Taiwan Yearbook, 2006).

More recently, demands from the public are to change and reform the regulations and curriculum that are not meeting new trends in seeing the world as an international community (Ministry of Education, 2006). The regulation was old and outdated, so the Ministry of Education started a reform that was based on guidelines from the Action Plan for Educational Reform. In 1998, the Ministry of Education implemented the General Guidelines of Elementary and Junior High School Curriculum for Grades 1-9, which stress on languages, health and physical education, social studies, arts and humanities, mathematics, science and technology, and interdisciplinary activities. The language curriculum accounts for 20-30 percent of the curriculum; the other six areas equally share the remaining time for instruction (Taiwan Yearbook, 2006). The five aspects in the guidelines are “humanitarian attitudes, integration ability, democratic literacy, native awareness and a global perspective, and capacity for lifelong learning” (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 4).
Preschool and Kindergarten Education

A two-year preschool education is not compulsory in Taiwan because of limited financial resources. Children in both private and public preschools represented only 51% of this age group in 1999. The enrollment rate is much lower than in other developed nations. The majority of kindergartens and preschools are private, so they charge parents higher tuition than public institutions. Although more and more parents recognize the importance of preschool education, not all of them can afford it. With higher and ever increasing demands for public preschool education, the MOE has tried to increase the number of preschools using the same facility in existing elementary schools (The Republic of China Yearbook-Taiwan, 2001).

In 1983, the government had a plan to stimulate the growth of preschools and made changes, cutting the number of students in classes, setting up the training programs for teachers, and decreasing the teacher-child ratio. The Preschool Education Law states that the purpose of preschool education is to develop good habits, encourage physical and mental development, and to develop living experience (The Republic of China Yearbook-Taiwan, 2001). In order to build up a channel to train preschool teachers, the Ministry set up the Establishment Standard for Universities and Colleges Offering Teacher Education in 1995. In order to increase the enrollment rates of kindergartens, the Ministry of Education has education vouchers for parents who have five-year-old children attending registered private kindergartens in 2000, and parents would receive NT $10,000 each year from the government (Ministry of Education, 2005).

There are three kinds of kindergartens in Taiwan: Mandarin-only, Mandarin-English bilingual and English only immersion programs. Taiwanese children usually
begin to attend kindergartens when they are around three years old and finish the program when they are seven years old. Mandarin-only kindergartens use only Mandarin as the medium of instruction and interaction between children and teachers. Since Mandarin is the official language in Taiwan, teachers are required to have good teaching skills, but not language skills in Mandarin. Because of more than forty years of experience with Mandarin-only kindergartens, the curriculum and selection of teachers is better than bilingual or English-only immersion kindergartens. Mandarin-English bilingual kindergartens usually provide two hours of instruction in English in the morning, and children learn in Mandarin the rest of the day. Either Mandarin speaking teachers or native English speakers teach the English classes in Mandarin-English bilingual kindergartens. The English materials are also integrated into Mandarin. With high demands and parents’ expectations, English immersion kindergartens have become very popular in Taiwan. From the big city to rural parts of Taiwan, the English immersion programs are everywhere. Materials and instruction in English immersion kindergartens are in English, and most of the teachers are native speakers of English. During instruction, there is no Mandarin translation, and children are allowed to speak only English.

According to 幼稚教育法 [the Preschool Education Law], there are six areas that need to be covered in the curriculum, including health, games, music, cognition, language and common sense. Foreign language learning is not included in the guidelines, but it becomes the main feature in slogans used to attract patents and children to most kindergartens in Taiwan. The classroom in English-only immersion kindergartens consists of a foreign teacher (English-speaking), a Mandarin-speaking teacher, and 15-20 children. The curriculum usually includes language arts, math, social studies, computers,
and physical education. The foreign teacher is in charge of teaching materials, and the Mandarin-speaking teacher assists with children’s daily needs in kindergartens. The Chinese-English bilingual kindergarten curriculum consists of half Chinese and half English or mixtures of Chinese and English in conversation.

Elementary School Education

In 1979, the National Education Law entitled all school-aged children (age from six to fifteen years old) to nine years of basic education that includes six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. Three years later, the Compulsory School Attendance Act was revised to state that parents of school-age children must have their children attend school. If parents fail to do so, they will face a penalty from the government. Elementary school is where Taiwanese school-aged children receive their first official education. Since the mid 1990s, class size has been reduced to improve teaching and learning quality in elementary schools. The report from 1999 showed that the enrollment rate was 99.92 percent, and the class size was down to an average of 31.46 students per classroom (Taiwan Yearbook, 2006).

English became one of the compulsory subjects in elementary school education in 2001. The Ministry of Education recruited native English speakers to teach English in both elementary and junior high schools in order to improve the quality of English education and help rural areas getting English teachers. The local dialects (Taiwanese, Hakka or aboriginal dialects) are also new subjects in elementary school education. These are compulsory subjects for students, who must choose to learn a
English Education in Taiwan

As Oladejo (2006) describes it, English is a foreign language in Taiwan because it is one of the two compulsory languages used in schools. Mandarin is the other language. Even though there are other foreign languages taught in the country, English has higher status. It is well known that English is the foreign language of international communication in Taiwan and around the world. The goals of the English curriculum are developing basic communication skills in English, getting students’ interested in learning English, and understanding both local and foreign cultures. Before 2001, most students started to learn English officially in the first year of junior high school (7th grade) to the end of senior high school (12th grade) and the freshman year of college. But due to the stress of passing entrance exams for senior high schools and colleges, teachers have been forced to teach English, strictly focusing on reading and writing. This kind of teaching style has had a negative impact on students’ willingness and motivation to learn English. Like Chern (2002) described “students’ motivations for learning English has remained at the level sufficient either to fulfill the course requirements or to pass the entrance examinations to the next level of schooling” (p. 92). Many will never know how much fun it can be to learn English.

In 1996, scholars started to ask officials of the Ministry of Education to consider moving the start of English education to the elementary schools. There was no entrance exam for entering junior high schools, so that children would feel less stress in
learning English, and teachers could use different approaches to teach it. The General Guidelines of Elementary and Junior High School Curriculum for Grades 1-9 (Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum) noted that goals of elementary English education focus on developing students’ basic communication skills, increasing their interests in learning English, learning the customs and cultures of both Chinese and English (Ministry of Education, 2000). However, the class periods are limited to two sections per week (40-80 minutes). Given the limited instructional time, it is difficult to achieve all of the goals the Ministry of Education set. As part of the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum, the Ministry of Education implemented changes starting in the 5th grade in 2001. However, two years later, the Ministry of Education wanted to make changes to lower the starting point to 3rd grade. Because of these changes, students now have greater access and more time to study English. For the third and fourth graders, the curriculum of English focuses mainly on listening and speaking. Emphasizing listening and speaking can help students build a foundation of oral communication in English.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education announced that preschools and kindergartens were not allowed to use a curriculum that is only in English, because English fever in Taiwan has caused many to ignore the real goals of early childhood education. With so many parents and owners of kindergartens voicing their opinions in opposition to a ban on teaching English in kindergartens, the then-director of Elementary and Junior High School education department, Tsai-Shung Wu, explained the policy, emphasizing the prohibitions only on teaching English full-time in the kindergartens. The Ministry of Education still allows kindergartens to teach English as one of the courses.
The purpose is to ban illegal cram schools that act like kindergartens to assure children’s safety (Huang, 2004).

Issues

In the case of children living in a second language environment, Lightbown (2000) has cautioned that children who are put in a second language environment without developing their first language could end up with poor proficiency in both languages and long-term negative effects in their future education. No one knows exactly how much time it takes to learn a language, but it obviously cannot be done only in classroom settings. Especially for students in foreign/second language settings, instruction in English is limited in the classroom, and hours of instruction are restricted. Limited time for instruction does not help students in acquiring a foreign language within a restricted time frame. Lightbown (2000) has stressed “the intensity of the exposure and the opportunity to continue using the language over a long period of time is as the starting age in the effectiveness of classroom instructor” (p. 449). If students continue their exposure from elementary to high schools, they could have advantages over others who lack continuous exposure to English instruction. Lightbown (1985) estimated that the most successful language acquirers would have spent at least 12,000-15,000 hours by the age of six. In the case of a foreign language, children would have to split the hours between the first and foreign language. In the case of Taiwan, many children would be dividing these hours between a second and third language both new to the learners.

Is it really worth investing this much time in foreign language learning while still developing the first language? Using her daughter Hannah as a case study, Dr.
Hsiang-Chun Chang (2003b) wrote a book, to describe what was going on in kindergarten with only English instruction: the impact on cognitive, physical and affective development and the difficult transition from an English-only to Mandarin-only learning environment when Hannah started in the elementary school. Chang said that in Taiwan, parents do not know the criteria for choosing the “right” kindergarten for their children. They are forced to ask around and then choose a program based on instinct. There is no reliable basis for such a decision. Choosing the first program for young children is the most important, because families have different financial situations and expectations for learning outcomes. Whatever is suitable for their friends or relatives’ children may not apply for their own children, because every child is different and unique. Chang (2003b) also cautioned parents to evaluate the so-called professionals’ opinions or statements before taking their advice, because their positions may be biased.

Chan and Wu (2004) did a study relating to the current English teaching and foreign language learning anxiety. Anxiety over learning a foreign language is different for students with varying levels of English proficiency, time limitations in English teaching, and access to English instruction outside of the classroom. These three factors are commonly observed throughout schools in Taiwan. In their study, they chose 601 fifth graders and nine English teachers to answer questionnaires and later interviewed the participants. One teacher said, “The main problem is that there are big differences among students. Some have learned English outside school for years, and some haven’t” (p. 309).

The differences in English proficiency between students have caused teachers trouble in designing curriculum suitable for all students. Giving everyone something to
learn has become the most difficult task that English teachers face everyday. According to Hung (2007), 60-70% children have been learning English outside of classroom settings in Taiwan and 71% in Taipei. English instruction outside the classroom has become so prevalent that English teachers in schools are forced to accommodate, adopting their instructional materials so that students would not have to learn the same context twice. However, it is unfair to have English teachers making changes for a few students, and accommodating their needs over these of other students.

Early English education has been promoted as a key to achievement in some countries, but contact is often limited to the privileged or higher socioeconomic population. Educational equity becomes another issue to consider in starting the English curriculum early. Ideally, everyone should have access to the same education (Nikolov & Djigunovic 2006). More privileged children can get their English instruction earlier and longer than less privileged children, because their parents send them to cram schools. Cram schools are not affordable for all parents and children. Children who do not go to cram schools can lose confidence, since most of their classmates are already learning English before they begin the process. This cram school trend also affects the teachers’ curriculum because they have to consider the needs of all students in class and meet their expectations. From my own experience, I had already learned to write the alphabet four years before official English instruction started, as had most of my classmates. I assumed that everyone already knew it, as did my English teacher. But she still checked to see if anyone did not know the alphabet. Surprisingly, two out of 54 students had never heard of or learned the alphabet. These two students immediately were sent to get special instruction, and the rest of us continued to learn the regular curriculum. Even though
teaching the alphabet was the first content the English teacher taught in the first class, most teachers skipped it, because they assumed that students had already learned it.

In early childhood education, the most important thing is not learning English as a foreign language, but most parents think that learning to speak fluent English is the first priority, and they are afraid that their children are going to miss a golden opportunity to start. Chen (2004) warned parents that they could suffer an increased financial burden, because they would have to pay more for private preschools than public preschools. The unrealistic expectation has been to see immediate results, children that can sing or read in English. This kind of expectation has forced school officials and teachers to change the curriculum so that children can show off their abilities in the short term. Forcing young children to learn English has become the trend in the early childhood education programs, and the real goals of the preschool curriculum have been ignored for almost 30 years. Chen (2004) has described the preschool and kindergarten settings as filled with desks, chairs, whiteboards, textbooks and homework materials, but no picture books or learner corners.

In Taiwan, the government provides a list of approved textbooks for teachers to choose. English teachers at the elementary level have full power to choose the curriculum they want to use in the classrooms, and teachers at different grades can choose textbooks from different publishers. Choosing textbooks from different publishers creates an articulation problem in curricula. This result is confusion for students the different styles of textbooks and difficulty level of materials. Chern (2002) emphasized that English textbooks are supposed to follow the guidelines of the new English curriculum but different sets of textbooks could not guarantee the compatibility of
materials and contents among them. The content and continuity of textbooks becomes a problem for children who move to another city or school. After entering the elementary schools, most parents still send their children to cram schools (or after school program) for extra English classes. The reason for parents sending children to cram schools is to let children receive continuing English instruction and to get supplement the curriculum taught in schools.

Summary

The English policy in Taiwan has changed in the last ten years. The starting time for learning English officially has changed from 7th grade to third grade, but the curriculum has still not corresponded to the changes in language policy. The primary issues of English policy in Taiwan are inconsistency in the curriculum and lack of continuity in textbook selection.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS,
AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Age has been viewed as the most important and influential factor of English language acquisition in Taiwan. Proponents of the critical period hypothesis believe that children should acquire a second language early to attain better language proficiency, especially in phonology. Opponents of the critical period hypothesis believe that older second language learners can still achieve native-like proficiency in morphology, because older learners have already developed cognitively in acquiring their first language.

There are other variables in language acquisition, such as affective factors and environment. Affective factors include motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence. An English learning environment is especially difficult to create in Taiwan, because everything outside the classroom context is in Mandarin. Due to the lack of stimulation from the surrounding environment, students receive English instruction only in the classroom, and this is sometimes not a natural setting for learning English. Students have no opportunity to use English by communicating with others and to receive reinforcement from native speakers of English.

Immersion programs in Canada have been defined as a successful model in second language acquisition. Immersion programs have been used to promote English
education in Taiwan, especially in kindergartens. The case in Taiwan is different because English is a foreign language as compared to French, which is a second language in Canada. Students in Canada have more opportunities to use French than students in Taiwan have to use English outside of classroom settings. Immersion kindergartens in Taiwan focus on quick and easy ways to teach children English, because parents want to see immediate results in English language proficiency.

English as a compulsory subject and foreign language in Taiwan from 3rd grade to the freshman year of college has not succeeded in making most children fluent or bilingual. The critical factors of English education in Taiwan are insufficient teaching time and curriculum, large class size, and unqualified English teachers (both native and non-native English speakers). The most important factor, however, is inconsistency throughout entire curriculum from elementary to college. Children, parents and even government officials spend considerable time and money on English learning, but the outcome is not as good as they would like. There is no complete set of measures to assess outcomes and implementation of the new policy.

Instructional time for English in elementary schools is 40-80 minutes per week in Taiwan. It is not sufficient for learning a foreign language in an environment without a population of native speakers of English. Large class size makes it difficult for teachers and students to communicate with each other. Teacher-student and student-student interactions are necessary in learning a foreign language, because students might not have other opportunities to apply what they have learned in the classroom. With the high demands for English teachers, it is getting harder to find qualified teachers.
Unqualified teachers could delay students’ learning and not meet students’ needs academically.

Recommendations

Considering the English learning conditions in Taiwan, the model of Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) would be a good one to follow. There are three types of FLES: standard, Foreign Language Experience or Exploratory (FLEX) and enrichment (or partial) immersion. Standard FLES means that one foreign language is introduced as a subject for two years in the elementary school education. Four skills (i.e., listening and understanding, speaking, reading and writing) are included in standard FLES programs. FLEX focuses on exposing students to one or more foreign languages and experiences to foster cross-cultural awareness. The FLEX programs’ goals are similar to the FLES programs, but some of the FLEX programs only focus on the oral skills (Lipton, 1988). Enrichment or partial immersion programs were previously discussed in Chapter III.

Because of the high demands of early English instruction for children, it is not wise for government officials to ban English teaching in kindergarten. Parents would still be willing to find a program that could provide their children with this kind of instruction, no matter what the government does to restrict immersion programs for kindergarten. To prevent violations of government policy, the immersion programs would change their names or fake the curriculum for official check-ups. I suggest that the government officials (especially the Ministry of Education) cooperate with scholars who specialize in second language acquisition to develop guidelines for the programs to follow.
Additionally, developing a well-structured curriculum is also important because students need a steady and clear path to develop their language proficiency.

The problem of current English language policy is the lack of systematic and comprehensive direction for the whole learning process. The government often revises the parts that need to be corrected. Although it is easy to only correct one part of policy, it is the time to examine English language policy from top to bottom. First of all, preschool and kindergarten education should be a priority in implementing new changes. The public expects to have well-organized preschools that fulfill the needs of children, and English education should be included. However, how English is taught is critical. Parents expect children to acquire both Mandarin and English in kindergarten, and to use both languages naturally outside of classrooms.

For children, English should be fun to learn and use, both inside and outside of classroom settings. However, most children in Taiwan probably do not feel comfortable using English to communicate with others outside classroom settings. Even when they want to use English to communicate, people might not speak English at all. It is difficult to ask children to use both Mandarin and English equally outside of classroom context. Most kindergartens in urban areas of Taiwan (especially Taipei) have limited space to set up equipment for physical education development. In fact, physical education has been sacrificed because of limited space. The Total Physical Response (TPR) method is one solution. By combining both language teaching with physical education together, children would feel less pressure while responding to the teacher’s commands physically and moving around in the classroom. It is difficult to ask kindergarten-aged children to sit
still for long periods of time, so an efficient solution would be to implement TPR in the curriculum.

It is important to help students establish English reading habits because learning English in Taiwan should not be limited only to the classroom context. Recreational, self-selected readings have a powerful impact on English language development in countries using English after graduation. Students can be encouraged to continue to improve their English language proficiency. The government should provide public access to English education, so that people can learn and acquire English in their daily lives and in comfortable environments. Resources in the library are free, so children could choose newspapers, books or magazines to read after school if the instructional materials in class are too easy or too boring for them. Libraries are equipped with video and DVD players, enabling children to access videotapes or DVDs for listening practice. For the lower socioeconomic families or those who live in remote areas, local libraries could even provide materials. As Krashen (2003) has pointed out, the library could provide authentic materials, such as novels, comics or magazines so that students would always have access to materials other than textbooks. This could also solve the problems of people who live in rural areas lacking educational resources. For example, using media and Internet resources can provide comprehensible input for the public. Most people would be free to use it at any time. For example, to practice listening, people can go to http://www.eslpod.com. This website has various listening exercises available, and the segments are recorded by native speakers of English that could offer people who live in the limited English resource area. Using this online resource could save money and resources used to find qualified foreign teachers. The opportunities described above offer
different outlets so that children can use to enhance their interest in learning English after school or develop reading habits in English. Gass and Selinker (2001) have observed that, “A learner who is vigilant about instituting many encounters to gain comprehensive inputs is more likely to be successful in a second language learning environment” (p. 354).

Cable television channels and programs are another outlet. The government can implement English educational programs that provide children with opportunities to practice or learn English in a comfortable environment. However, individuals in rural areas or from lower socioeconomic levels might not have access to cable television. The PTS (Public Television Service) is free to the public in Taiwan, so that everyone has access to this channel. It is an independent and non-profit organization that serves the public and is used as a tool to provide better quality broadcasting programs to the public in Taiwan. I suggest that the government use PTS to broadcast English education programs, so that more children receive the same opportunities to learn English. The government could provide materials and instructional manuals that correspond to television programs, and children learn English in an environment that is comfortable for them. The website for “Talk in English on PTS” (http://www.pts.org.tw/php2/program/e42007/) could be a model for the government design of a curriculum for children. The website has icons for today’s lesson, e-classroom, e-contest, hot news and study zone that are updated daily, so that all the materials are available for students to use. All the previous lessons are archived so that students can review the materials if they want to do so.
Kindergartens also need to cooperate with the government to design a curriculum that reinforces materials from the English television programs. Parents and kindergarten teachers use instructional manuals to assist children while they are watching English programs. It is important for the government to have a fully developed plan before implementing English learning programs on Public Television Service. Evaluation should be required to help the government and program developers make changes for future television programs. Choosing age-appropriate English learning programs is the most important step in this process. The PTS has already provided English programs, such as “Let’s talk in English on PTS,” as television programs, and offers free video on demand on their website, although this video is too difficult for children to watch. PTS also produces high quality children’s programs to teach local culture and language. English television programs for children are also needed. The English television programs in Taiwan are designed to accommodate students’ needs for entrance exams or adults’ needs to enhance their English proficiency.

Conclusions

In Taiwan, English education at the elementary school has started without quality teaching materials and teacher training. This situation is the result of parents’ pressures and demands to move the official starting age to the third grade. The goal of English education is stated in the General Guidelines of Elementary and Junior High School Curriculum for Grades 1-9: developing students’ basic communication skills, increasing their interest learning English, learning the customs and cultures of both Chinese and English. What is it that parents want or expect? The government should
decide what the goal is for English education in Taiwan, so that language policy can be revised to fit the needs. If the answer is that students should become bilingual, English should first become an official language in Taiwan. The surrounding environment should be filled with both Mandarin and English, so that children can be immersed, learning English naturally. Hung (2007) recommended that English learning should be equally divided into four parts (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in the curriculum because reading and writing skills have been ignored in the English curriculum of elementary schools. No single skill should be sacrificed in learning English, as it is important for English teachers to incorporate all of them in the curriculum. Hung (2007) also suggested that English teachers design lesson plans that are authentic and contextualized, so that students are motivated to engage in reading and writing classes.

There is no research on children whose first language is not Mandarin, despite the fact that they face the challenge of transitioning to both a second (Mandarin) and foreign language (English). In immersion kindergartens, they are exposed to one or two new languages, and then rely on Mandarin for academic study throughout their schooling. Further empirical research should be conducted to provide a better understanding of how to ease the transition for students learning three languages at a young age and to see how these children perform academically in elementary schools. All of the current research focuses on finding out how starting age influences children’s proficiency in English, but it is equally important to determine what the effects are on children’s first language development and later academic performance.

Until now, no researcher can guarantee that an early start will lead children to more success in foreign language learning, and an insufficient curriculum could influence
children’s motivation and interest in learning English. This result is not what parents really want. The lack of motivation is the most important factor that parents should try to avoid. Most parents lose interest in learning English, because they think they don’t have an authentic learning environment and positive reinforcement. Parents do not want their children to follow in their footsteps and make the same mistakes. Parents expect to see positive results from the education reforms, but the results are still not good enough to meet the parents’ standards.

In conclusion, elementary school English education has started without enough preparation in the schools, an inconsistent curriculum and limited teacher training. When English education started in the elementary schools, a shortage of qualified English teachers became a problem in Taiwan. It is important for the government to set up appropriate teacher training programs and provide updated information for teachers. After the training programs, teachers also need to be tested on what they have learned in the training sessions. Their test results would be evaluated for changes in future training. Educator and parents also need basic knowledge of language acquisition so that they can better understand their children’s development in a multilingual society.
REFERENCES
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