
Local responses to global English: perceptions of English in Taiwan

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Personal responses toward the spread of global English and its impact in Taiwan

1. Introduction

English language policy in Taiwan has undergone major changes at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The national policy of promoting English and the extension of English-language education at the elementary level has inevitably had a great impact on Taiwan's education system and the status of English in Taiwan (see Chern, 2003; Hung, 2003; Chen, 2006). While the global spread of English has been taking place via national policy and cultural institutions such as schools, a relevant question is how the spread of English is perceived and what responses are made by individuals in Taiwan.

Through Taiwanese people's perceptions and expectations of the English language, this research explores the implications of the spread of English at the individual level. Using semi-structured interviews, it investigates individuals' experiences, beliefs and attitudes regarding the English language, and focuses on personal responses toward the spread of global English and its impact in Taiwan.

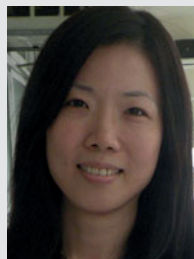
2. Research method

2.1 Semi-structured interviewing

Semi-structured interviewing was employed to investigate perceptions of Taiwanese people regarding the impact of English and ELT in Taiwan. The reason is that a semi-structured interview is neither totally restricted by a list of standard questions, nor non-directive. It allows interviewers to use prompts, probes and follow-up questions to obtain further information about interviewees' circumstances and to clarify or expand their answers (Drever,

1995). In this research, interviews on a one-to-one basis are used. The aim is to allow informants to express opinions in their own words and follow their own sense of what is important without interferences and influences from other informants. In addition, interviews on a one-to-one basis can ensure that all questions are answered by each respondent and therefore facilitate comparability of interviewees' responses (Bailey, 1994).

Based on the review of the linguistic situation and English education in Taiwan and an overview of English-related news reports in the period from September 2001 when English was introduced into the elementary curriculum to December 2005, the following four main themes of the interview questions are generated: (1) attitudes towards the role of local languages, English, the individual's mother tongue and other foreign



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languages (Questions 1–5); (2) English education and English learning (Questions 6–8); (3) use and functions of English in daily life and the mass media (Questions 9–10); (4) impact or influence (positive or negative) of English on individual, socio-cultural and politico-economic levels in Taiwan (Questions 11–17).

Seventeen questions are included in the interview schedule with follow-up questions asked according to the background of interviewees and the situation. Forty-three interviews were conducted. Each interview took around forty minutes though it also depended on interviewees' responses and the on-the-spot interaction. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin) by myself in a period of three months from July to September 2005. All the interviews were recorded and are presented and analyzed through the selected issues in Section 3.

2.2 Sampling

The sample of interviewees is not intended to be representative of Taiwanese society as a whole. Respondents are instead from the more elite section of society because these are the people who have the most contact with English and who are better placed to comment on its impact. Therefore, interviewees from different levels of the education system have been included. Informants also include government officials who participate in the process of policy making and policy implementation, and parents of students, who in most cases make decisions for their children. The hypothesis here is that since English is a foreign language in Taiwan and English education is required in the state education system, as English is introduced and learned systematically, participants in the education system can be regarded as agents of the spread of English in Taiwan. They are the ones in Taiwan who really have the chance to use English or 'deal with' issues relating to English education. They are more aware of the effect of the English language and to a certain extent English plays a role in their life. Thus their overall perceptions of English can be considered significant. Additionally, in order to present individuals' perceptions of English in other social sectors, interviewees from different social backgrounds were also selected, including the social elite and people in the other private sectors.

In general, quota sampling and convenience sampling (or snowball sampling) were employed in this research. The interviewees consisted of people from the following six groups: governmental level, schooling (elementary level, secondary

level, tertiary level), members of the social elite and people from the other private sectors. Each group is allocated a quota of interviews. Codes of interviewees are presented in brackets according to their roles, e.g. ETE1 = the first English teacher in elementary schools. The interviewee classifications are set out in Table 1 below.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Determinants of attitudes to English

The age of the interviewees did not seem to be the key factor that influenced their responses to English. Rather, interviewees' responses were influenced by their education, working experiences or in some cases ethno-linguistic background. The respondents especially approving the promotion of English in Taiwan, such as PE1, ETH3, SE5 and SU1, do not necessarily belong to a particular social class or position. Their approval of English seems to be based on realistic and utilitarian reasons, such as English being considered the dominant language in the world.

Education can be identified as one of the factors influencing respondents' attitudes toward English. Respondents with a higher education background or in the academic professions, such as those with experience of studying abroad (e.g. PE1), those working in university or academia (e.g. TU1, TU2 and TU3) and postgraduates (e.g. SU3 and ESU1), tended to emphasize the importance of English not only in their life but also in regard to the future development of Taiwanese society. A possible reason is that English is the dominant language in most academic domains and English might play an important role in their professional and academic life.

In addition, compared to other respondents, English teachers generally had a more positive attitude toward the important role of English in Taiwan. Although the nine respondents who taught English at different levels took different positions on issues such as the starting point of English education, impact of English on local cultures, and the association between national English ability and national competitiveness, they generally agreed that learning English was beneficial. In addition, they concurred that it was necessary to give more attention to the effectiveness of English education in Taiwan.

Finally, ethnolinguistic background seems to influence respondents' opinions in some cases. For example, when asked whether English education or mother tongue education should be

Table 1: Interviewees by occupation and level of schooling

<i>Group 1: Governmental level</i>
Government official in Ministry of Education (1 interview) [G1]
(Han) Government official in Council of Indigenous Peoples (1 interview) [G2]
(Aboriginal) Government official in Council of Indigenous Peoples (1 interview) [G3]
<i>Group 2: Elementary level</i>
English teachers in elementary schools (3 interviews) [ETE 1, 2, 3]
Teachers of other subjects in elementary schools (3 interviews) [TE 1, 2, 3]
Parents of elementary students (2 interviews) [PE 1, 2]
<i>Group 3: Secondary level</i>
English teachers in high schools (3 interviews) [ETH 1, 2, 3]
Teachers of other subjects in high schools (3 interviews) [TH 1, 2, 3]
Students in senior high schools (2 interviews) [SH 1, 2]
Parents of high school students (2 interviews) [PH 1, 2]
<i>Group 4: Tertiary level</i>
English teachers at university/college level (3 interviews) [ETU 1, 2, 3]
Teachers of other subjects at university/college level (3 interviews) [TU 1, 2, 3]
English major students (3 interviews) [ESU 1, 2, 3]
Non-English major students (3 interviews) [SU 1, 2]
<i>Group 5: Executives and professionals</i>
Engineer, law clerk, medical doctor, researcher and executive etc. (5 interviews) [SE 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
<i>Group 6: People in the other private sectors</i>
People from the manufacturing industry, technician, nurse and salesperson etc. (5 interviews) [PP 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

given priority, those whose mother tongue was the official language, Mandarin (e.g. PE1, SU1), emphasized the importance of English and ignored other local languages. And some respondents

whose mother languages were Minnanyu, Hakka and aboriginal languages¹ (e.g. TU3, G3) tended to stress the importance of local languages and cultures. G3 (male, 39, a government official in CIP and an Amis) was the only aboriginal respondent in this research. His responses indicated a different attitude to issues regarding language and culture. For example, he insisted on the association between language and culture and his concern about the preservation of minority languages and cultures. His perceptions may be representative of those of minority groups because his aboriginal background and his official position may help him gain more knowledge of all of the aboriginal population.

Other factors such as the respondent's gender and region of residence may influence their perceptions in some way, but the sample is not large enough to confirm any influence on respondents' attitudes.

3.2 Summary of interview findings

Interview findings of this research can be summarized as follows:

(1) *Mother tongue education should be given priority over English education.* The majority of respondents considered that the mother tongue is an important element of culture and necessary for everyone. But for a few respondents, English education and education in local languages are not necessarily contradictory and English education should be prioritized because of its role in international communication.

(2) *Elementary education is regarded as the appropriate time to start English instruction.* The majority of respondents suggested that English education should be started at elementary level in order to achieve better results. However, instead of agreeing with the 'the younger the better' hypothesis, a large number of respondents believed that learning English at an early age might marginalize local language learning. Many also thought that English learning should be based on initial development of mother tongue skills.

(3) *English will continue to be the language that links Taiwan to the world.* Although some respondents considered that Chinese and other languages might challenge the *status quo* of English as the global language, the likelihood that English will maintain its dominant status in the next fifty years was accepted.

(4) *There is an unbalanced power relation between English and other foreign languages.* A large number of respondents (25 out of 43) agreed that English as a global language has reduced the

learning of other foreign languages in some way while some respondents (15 out of 43) argued that learning English did not necessarily lead to a marginalization of other foreign languages.

(5) *The use and functions of English in Taiwan have increased.* Although English is not regarded as a language for daily communication in Taiwan, many accept that the media use of English and the function of English in daily life have gradually increased.

(6) *Mastery of English is considered important for accumulating personal capital and English is regarded as a socio-cultural asset.* For most respondents, the benefits that learning English can provide are mainly related to communication and achievement in their careers. English is regarded as a tool for communicating with foreigners, to acquire knowledge, to obtain opportunities and to achieve a certain status or accomplishment.

(7) *English is associated with better careers and a higher status.* A high proportion of respondents (39 out of 43) agreed that learning English is beneficial for a better life or career and high English proficiency is regarded (by 33 out of 43 respondents) as a requisite for higher status in Taiwan.

(8) *English is strongly associated with national competitiveness.* A high proportion of respondents agree that the improvement of English proficiency at the national level is crucial for enhancing economic competitiveness, and more than half of the respondents (29 out of 43) agreed with the idea that greater proficiency in English could enhance Taiwan's global competitiveness.

(9) *Ambivalent attitudes to the overall impact of English on Taiwan.* There were concerns about cultural identity, cultural invasion and the problems of extending English education in Taiwan. But there was also approval of English as an indispensable means for individual and national development. More than half of the respondents admitted that the impact of English was not all positive, but the benefit and rewards it could provide outweighed its negative effects.

(10) *Anxiety about the consequences of lacking English.* Regarding issues such as English education and the importance of English for the Taiwanese society, many respondents expressed some worry or anxiety. The parents were worried that children would not be able to compete with others in the future if they did not learn English early. Ordinary people in Taiwan, like most of our respondents, were concerned that without English, people would not be competitive enough in employment, and Taiwan would therefore not be competitive enough in the world.

3.3 Commentary on respondents' views on English

Generally speaking, the perceptions of English in Taiwan presented in this research reflect many different influences: for example, the process of globalization, the political situation in Taiwan, language and education policy, the promotion of English by the mass media and the government and individuals' experiences and expectations. Subject to the selection of interviewees and the design of the interview schedule, the prominence of English in Taiwan is associated with the following discourses which repeatedly appeared in interviewees' responses: (1) the inevitability of globalization and internationalization; (2) English as the global language for international communication and economic competition; (3) a political discourse that configures Taiwan between Mainland China and the rest of East Asia; (4) a national economic planning discourse which considers people as manpower deficient in a skill required for business competitiveness; (5) a discourse of personal responsibility to one's children as well as one's country, to make them competitive; (6) a 'folk' second language acquisition discourse of 'the younger the better'.

For most of the interviewees, globalization and internationalization are neutral tendencies and to some degree interchangeable concepts. Both of them are associated with increasing connectedness across space and time. However, while globalization is regarded as a process of interconnectedness of the world in terms of economics, politics and cultures, internationalization refers to a process of making connections and interactions with other countries. English as the global language is considered the medium for the process of globalization and internationalization. The mixture of the first two discourses therefore results in a belief that the dominance of English will continue. Through discourses (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5), English is considered as the key to personal and national economic competitiveness. Discourses (5) and (6) further reinforce government and individuals' belief in extending English instruction to an earlier age.

On the other hand, the emphasis on English in Taiwan's national and educational policy inevitably provokes concerns about local languages and cultures. A cultural discourse of community, cultural marginalization and localization and an educational discourse emphasizing competition among languages and other subjects for time and resources, though relatively marginalized, can still be identified in interviewees' responses. Worries about local languages and cultures and

about the distribution of time and resources in the curriculum can not only be regarded as responses to the impact of English in Taiwan but also as a reflection on the global spread of English.

Although most respondents agreed that English would sustain its dominance in the next fifty years, a large number of respondents also pointed out that the influence of other languages such as Mandarin Chinese would increase and challenge the *status quo*. Since the spread of language is substantially influenced by the politico-economic power of its speakers, the rise of new economic powers such as China suggests that the use of their languages may spread. As Graddol (2006) proposes, in the future the status of English might be challenged by other languages in terms of economic advantage, size of speaking population and policy changes. However, although other languages such as Chinese and Spanish have risen as strong competitors and transformed the world language system, in the short term the foundation and network of global English is so strong that challenges from other languages will not seriously affect the global status of English. As Crystal (2004: 22) points out, it is unlikely that the global role of English will be replaced for the foreseeable future when 'the factors which brought English to its present position are still very largely in place'.

According to the interviewees' responses, the use of English in Taiwan is increasing and it is still a gatekeeper in certain professions and classes. English is strongly associated with a better career, higher status or prestige, and better national competitiveness. This is due to the perceived benefits it can provide in education, employment and international communication. However, according to Graddol's (2006) projections, and as several respondents argue, when English becomes a common language for everyone, the economic advantage of English could diminish. In the long term, this prediction is plausible. But in the case of Taiwan, the economic advantage of English will not ebb away, at least for the next generation. This is because, as several interviewees pointed out, English in Taiwan is still very far from a 'near-universal basic skill' (ibid. p.15) and it remains a source of individual advantage.

The dominance of English around the world and in Taiwan to a large extent leads to the assumption that English may be the key to national and individual economic competitiveness. The association between English and economic competitiveness, as shown in most interviewees' responses, combined with the '*the younger the better*' hypothesis has led to the earlier introduction of English into the school curriculum. Similar policies can be

found in several Asian countries (Nunan, 2003). While only a few interviewees literally believe the '*the younger the better*' hypothesis, most approve the necessity of extending English instruction in elementary education. However, although several researchers suggest that pronunciation might benefit from learning at an early age, there is little evidence that the level of English proficiency gained is determined by the age factor (e.g. Singleton, 2001; Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2006). In fact, apart from the length of English instruction and the age factor, the effectiveness of English education to a large extent depends on the context of teaching and learning such as teaching materials, methodology, curriculum design and students' motivation. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the early introduction of English will increase levels of proficiency. If the necessity of English in Taiwan is acknowledged, more attention should be paid to other factors in the context of teaching and learning rather than just the age factor.

Turning to the impact of English on local languages and cultures, English is often given priority in national policy and educational agendas. However, with limited time, resources and money, a linguistic power struggle is evident between Mandarin, English and local languages. According to Chen (2006), English-language education policy in Taiwan was more systematically planned and implemented than the local language-in-education policy has been. For central and local governments, schools, teachers and textbook publishers, the low status and limited function of the local languages reduces incentives to promote these languages (ibid.). The emphasis on English has increased anxieties about the future of local languages and cultures. This fear was expressed by those respondents who considered that mother tongue education should be given priority. That said, interviewees' attitudes to the impact of English in Taiwan are ambivalent. While concerns about the preservation of local languages and cultures were expressed by many respondents, the necessity of English was also recognized by most respondents and strengthened in Taiwan through English language policy and English education. These ambivalent responses indicate that English is not a monolithic phenomenon, and that Taiwanese society is far from a passive receiver in the face of the global spread of English. As Okano (2006) argues, the impact of global forces is not unilateral. Instead, it is the local context (e.g. national policy, concerned organizations and individuals) which decides in what aspects, and to what extent, global English will affect the local society.

4. Conclusion: Perceptions of English and the impact of English on Taiwan

For most respondents, the dominance of English is a simple matter of fact and the benefits of learning English are based on common sense. However, relations between language, culture and identity also evoked interesting responses and were controversial in the discussion on the impact of global English. The responses of the interviewees showed that languages were given different evaluations at different levels according to their functions and social values. In general, English is highly approved of in areas related to national and personal economic well-being, while the prevalence of English also leads to concern about local languages and cultures.

A somewhat contradictory picture therefore emerges. On the one hand, English appears to transform the power relations of languages and cultures in Taiwan. In doing so, it inevitably creates unfavorable conditions for the growth and the maintenance of the local languages and cultures. On the other hand, it also provides Taiwanese society and individuals with a global instrument for international communication and economic competition. In this sense, English as a vehicle of western cultures and values could be perceived as a threat to the local cultures. But as access to resources, knowledge and the world and as a medium to introduce local cultures and characteristics to the world, it can also be seen as a possible tool to empower local society, to express local identity, and thus to resist the socio-cultural dominance of English.

This research has shown that the overall impact of English is complex and that its effect is, in many ways, contradictory on various levels. It depends on how society and individuals identify themselves and on how English is recognized and adopted by Taiwanese society and individuals. In other words, the impact of English varies according to the strength of local identity and the degree of recognition of English as a tool to express local identity. It also depends on the degree of cultural awareness of the community, and their consequent reactions towards the influence of English.

Generally speaking, Taiwan represents a complex case in the global spread of English. A feeling of unease is expressed by many respondents because Taiwan lacks a clear-cut political status. In this sense, Taiwan is different from other East Asian countries. Although Taiwan and several East Asian countries have implemented similar

national policies to strengthen their national English proficiency, Taiwanese society tends to give more emphasis to English due to anxiety about losing its economic advantage. Although objections to the over-emphasis on English can be found in interviewees' responses, most respondents indicated the importance of English for Taiwanese society due to the disadvantaged position of Taiwan. In short, Taiwanese people tend to accept and adapt rather than resist the influence of global English. The overall impact of English is thus considered more positive than negative, and English is generally recognized as an important factor in Taiwan's future development.

Note

1 These are varieties of Austronesian languages spoken by the aboriginal Austronesian population, whose languages and cultures have been increasingly sinicised over the centuries.

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