

Parents' Attitudes Towards Bilingual Education Policy in Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper investigates the opinions of parents on some critical issues relating to recent educational reforms and their effects on foreign language education in Taiwan, particularly those aspects of the reforms that relate to the learning of English as a foreign language in the country. The paper noted that educational reforms in the country are dictated down from the authorities with little input from the public at large. This process has often resulted in complaints and confusion among the population, and consequently further reforms have often been rushed through in order to plug the emerging lacunae. The study found that much of the changes embarked upon by the government are out of tune with parental perceptions and expectations. It strongly recommends the need to develop a process of societal participation and parental consultation in educational planning and language policy issues, prior to the implementation of such reforms through the education process. This way, frequent changes and the attendant confusion that have characterized the education system in Taiwan can be minimized. Other suggestions are offered towards enhancing the teaching of English as a foreign language in Taiwan.

Introduction: Taiwan—Geography and Background on Language Education Policy

Taiwan, sometimes also known as the Republic of China, is the name often used in referring to the main island of the country and its conglomerates of 64 islands, including those of Penghu (the Pescadores), Kinmen (Quemoy), and Matsu, near the Fukien province of China. The main part of the country is

about 36,000 square kilometers. The last census in November 2002 indicated that Taiwan's population was 22.51 million.¹

Between 1895 and 1945, Taiwan was a colony of Japan and as a consequence of this, the Japanese language was forced upon Taiwan as both its official and national language. By the end of the 50 years' Japanese occupation, about 50% of the population were able to understand and speak Japanese (Sugimoto, 1971). Today, even though Japanese is not one of the main languages of Taiwan, it is not uncommon to hear fluent Japanese spoken, especially among those who are over 60 years of age.

Although approximately 70% of the population speaks Taiwanese fluently, the language is more popular in the south than in the northern part of the country. Taiwanese originated in the Han language system but was later influenced by non-Han dialects. However, it still contains many ancient Han linguistic features. Its writing system is based on existing Han characters, but has not been developed enough to represent all the distinctive sounds of Taiwanese. One of the reasons is that some sounds, though originating from the Han language, have changed so dramatically over time that their corresponding characters can no longer be traced, while others have a written form that has since become rare. Another reason is that some of the sounds might have been derived from non-Han languages that never had a written form to begin with.

During the Japanese era, and for a considerable time after Taiwan had been receded to China, Taiwanese language was not allowed to be spoken or used in schools, nor was it formally used in official government circles. This was due partly to the desire to promote the nationalization of Chinese Mandarin, and because Taiwanese was considered inferior to Chinese Mandarin. Even today, it is not unusual to hear pejorative comments suggesting that speaking Taiwanese is a marker of low educational attainment. It is worth noting, however, that the fortunes of the Taiwanese language have been changing gradually, particularly since the inception of the current government. There have also been calls in recent times to make Taiwanese the national language or second official language of the country. Nevertheless, Mandarin Chinese is still the national and official language of Taiwan.

At the end of the occupation when Taiwan reverted back to China, the national and official language policy changed in favor of Mandarin (Van den Berg, 1985). Schools actively taught and promoted the language, and traditional Chinese materials were soon reintroduced. Taiwanese's lack of its own writing system and the perception that it is a language associated with the low class might have contributed directly to the decision to adopt Chinese Mandarin as the official language of Taiwan in 1946. In addition, it has been suggested that the choice of Mandarin Chinese as the national language was largely based on at least two factors: the urgent desire to facilitate communication between its diverse ethno-linguistic groups, and the need to

replace Japanese as the language of education (Tsao, 1999; Young, 1987). Apparently, none of the other Chinese languages spoken in Taiwan, including Hakka, would have been suitable for the status of national language at the time because none had its own independent writing system. Similarly, none of the numerous indigenous languages including Amis, Nataoran, Atayal, Babuza, Bunun, Kanakanabu, Kavalan, Kulon-Pazeh, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saaroa, Saisiyat, Taroko, Thao, Tsou, and Yami had their own writing system. In addition, none of these languages were spoken by a considerable number of people to be worth considering as a national language.

Both by its official classification and day to day functions, English is a foreign language in Taiwan. However, unlike any other foreign language in the country, English enjoys a unique status and prestige. It is the preferred foreign language of international communication, trade, and diplomacy. More significantly, English is the only compulsory foreign language, and one of the two compulsory languages in public schools, the other being the national and official language, Mandarin Chinese.

Recent global and local events, especially the continued strength of English on the world scene, and the admission of Taiwan into the World Trade Organization body, have led to further calls to strengthen the position of English on the educational and sociopolitical agenda. Examples of this public expression for increased English usage in Taiwan include the president's suggestion in 2002 that English should become the second official language of the island. Since then, debates have ensued over the status and role of English in Taiwan. The former Premier, Yu, soon followed with an endorsement of the president's view, promising to make English the second official language of the country within 6 years (Ko & Yeh, 2002). By January 2003, the Ministry of Education joined the debate by proposing to go hunting abroad for native English speakers to teach the language in elementary and junior high schools in order to rapidly promote the spread and quality of the language on the island.

As part of its efforts to further promote the learning and use of English in the country, the government of Taiwan has recently embarked upon a number of major policy changes, an example of which is the creation of a bilingual (Chinese–English) environment in public institutions and in the community at large. Major features of such an environment include the mandatory translation of direction and road signs to English across major cities and towns, as well as bilingual (Chinese–English) production of public signs and other directions in public buildings. Some documents and forms, such as those for embarkation and disembarkation, visa, tax, and the driving test, are also available in both Chinese and English. In reality, however, not many people in public offices or in the wider community can actually use English to communicate, and the effects of the steps taken so far in promoting the learning and use of the language remain to be seen.

Another recent change aimed at enhancing the Taiwan people's interest in English was the introduction of a General English Proficiency Test, which commenced in 2000. The objective was to improve and standardize the English performance of the citizens across different levels of learning. One other significant change is the lowering of the commencement age for formal exposure to English. Previously, students were only allowed to learn English officially the first year of junior high school. The beginning of the 2005 school year, children in elementary school Grade 3 were expected to commence learning English. By so doing, not only are students able to formally access the language within the 9-year compulsory education system much earlier, but they also have a longer period and more opportunity to learn the language. Furthermore, several arms of the government, such as the police, the foreign services, and the judiciary, are increasingly using English for day to day functions. Efforts are also underway to encourage teachers at various levels to learn English. Additionally, competence in English will become a prerequisite for promotion in government services ("Gov't Employees," 2004).

Given this general atmosphere in which the learning of English is being promoted across the country, especially through formal education, and in view of the international significance of the language, it should not be surprising that more and more Taiwanese parents want to introduce their children to formal English learning even before the official commencement age. Consequently, the number of registered kindergartens in the country has grown to 3,234 in 2001 from a mere 28 in 1950. At least, 50% of these are currently estimated to be engaged in teaching English (Taiwan News, 2004). Several private institutions, locally known as "cram schools," also exist. Their primary goal is to prepare students for the numerous English-language examinations that students are required to pass in the course of elementary and secondary school education. Passing examinations has become a major issue since students' progress is determined almost completely by the outcome.

Taiwan's education system has often been punctuated by numerous changes and reviews. While many of these changes apparently aim at plugging identified or perceived lacunae in the existing policies and practices, they are often introduced without much debate in society as to their desirability and consequences. As a result, the policies and adjustments to them often create more problems than they attempted to solve. Furthermore, many of these decisions tend to be unsatisfactory because they sometimes fail to genuinely address the needs of Taiwan's rapidly changing society. More specific complaints in recent time have focused on the highly competitive learning environment, lack of resources, and the overdependence upon examination results as a way of measuring students learning achievements. Critics have also argued that such an examination regime often emphasizes rote memorization. Students are exposed to a vast amount of texts and information, much of which are simply regurgitated during the examinations. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for many of the changes to be greeted with skepticism and

complaints from concerned parents and the public in general (Government Information Office, 2003).

Even with the changes highlighted above, and despite the increased awareness and interest among the general populace towards English learning in Taiwan, the current situation is highly laden with confusion. Four reasons are provided to support the foregoing claim. First, the central education authority puts a language education policy in place that stipulates that the starting age for English learning should be approximately 9 years, or in the third grade of elementary school. In reality, however, different schools across the country offer English lessons to children at different grades, depending on whether such schools are in the cities or in remote locations. While almost all public schools in cities, such as Taipei, Shin-Chu, Taichung, and Kaohsiung, offer English classes to first graders, schools in country towns and villages like Fongang and Neipu are still struggling with the requirement to start teaching English in the fifth grade. It is not unusual, therefore, to find many children in remote locations who have never had English lessons until their first year in junior high school. This effectively implies that such children are many years behind their city counterparts. In other words, there is an obvious lack of uniformity in regard to the age or education level at which children across the country are introduced to the English language within the education curriculum. This situation arises partly because in Taiwan, almost all language/education policies are made by the central government, while the local governments are primarily responsible for implementing such decisions through the elementary and secondary school systems. As a result, local authorities in cities, which are also relatively financially stronger than their rural cousins, can afford to implement certain education policies, even if such policies are theoretically contrary to the central government's provisions, regardless of what the rest of the country may be doing.

Second, the number of preschool children learning English has continued to grow in the past few decades, which would sound as a positive development, especially in view of the need to rapidly globalize the country partly through the English-language competence of its citizens. According to the Ministry of Education documents, in 2001, there were 3,234 registered preschools (and probably almost as many unregistered) with 243,303 children as compared to only 28 such schools, attended by 17,111 children, in 1950. Almost all of these preschools and cram schools attract children with the golden promise to teach solely in English. Parents send their children to such schools in the hope that doing so will give these children the edge in a very competitive educational environment.

Despite acknowledging the importance of the contribution of these private schools to the general educational development of the country, the government, in August 2004, decided to immediately prohibit the teaching of English in kindergartens. Teaching kindergarten children in English is seen as

a violation of the Preschool Education Law (1981), which stipulates that the purposes of preschool education in the country are to help foster good habits, promote basic physical and mental developments, and enrich children's living experiences. That decision generated enormous public outcry, and as a result, the authorities backpedaled on the idea ("Gov't Employees," 2004). Obviously, the attempt to apply an education law that was a quarter of a century old did not seem to please a dynamic society that has constantly been redefining its position in the global market. The failure of the government to properly gauge public perceptions has thus led to confusion and public outcry which cannot be easily undone.

Third, there is a general level of confusion or ignorance among parents and within the education system in Taiwan regarding who should be an English-language teacher. It is an open secret that most parents prefer foreign English teachers to their local counterparts, even if they do not actually know how to properly determine the essential qualifications of English-language teachers. In order to please parents and secure their children's enrollment, private schools usually employ foreign teachers, most of who have neither teaching qualifications nor relevant educational backgrounds. A careful look at the qualifications posted on websites seeking teachers in Taiwan further supports the foregoing claim. Being a native speaker of English is enough of a qualification to become an English teacher in most of Taiwan's private schools, including universities and colleges. Interestingly, preferences for such untrained and unqualified teachers also vary, depending on the countries of origin. Anyone familiar with the local teacher employment situation in the country would admit that Americans and Canadians top the preferred list of teachers, while Australians, New Zealanders, and surprisingly, British teachers are only considered second best. In general, the most important qualification for employment as a native English teacher in Taiwan is the color of the skin. For example, a fluent, but non-Caucasian native speaker of English from the United States would almost certainly need luck to get a job, while a Caucasian, but non-fluent speaker of the language from Switzerland or Poland, would easily pick up an English-teaching position a day or two after arrival in the country. As far as most parents and private schools are concerned, it would seem that being a native speaker of English and being qualified as a native teacher are simply two sides of the same coin.

The fourth reason for claiming that English-language education in Taiwan is punctuated with confusion can be found in another recent major decision made by the central education authorities. Due to an acute shortage of communicatively proficient local English-language teachers, the government proposed in 2003 to embark upon a program of mass recruitment of native speakers to teach in elementary and junior high schools in the country. Like other similar controversial decisions, this also generated heated debates, with opponents suggesting that such a move would be counterproductive, since it

may take away the funding and other resources that are already in short supply for training local English teachers. Supporters argue, however, that injecting native English speakers into the public school would uplift the current poor English-language proficiency of school leavers. It is worth noting here, however, that a decision such as this can only have been made on the premise that there are plenty of qualified native English teachers who are willing to come to Taiwan to work. It ignores the reality that English-speaking countries, such as England and Australia, also have a shortage of qualified English teachers in their own public schools.

A Brief Literature Review

Several studies have identified parents' attitudes towards bilingual education (Amaral, 2001; Lee, 1999; Lindhom-Leary, 2001; Schecter, Sharken-Taboada, & Bayley, 1996; Shannon & Milian, 2002; Shin & Gribbons, 1996; Shin & Kim, 1998; Shin & Lee, 1996; Young & Tran, 1999). These studies have investigated, among others, Spanish, Korean, Hmong, and Vietnamese parents' attitudes toward bilingualism and children's education. More recently, Lao's (2004) study investigated the attitudes of Chinese parents in America toward Chinese-English bilingualism. She found that:

Schools need to work in concert with parents to establish more effective home-school partnerships to meet the different language needs and expectations of the parents and students, and to provide students with the necessary language and literacy experiences in a meaningful way. (p. 99)

It is significant to mention, however, that not many studies exist which have systematically identified Taiwanese parents' attitudes towards bilingualism, particularly their attitudes toward some of the current issues relevant to English-Chinese bilingual education in Taiwan. Such an investigation will not only reveal in part the extent to which parents are involved in or concerned about the education of their children, but it will also reflect society's current attitudes towards bilingual education. Research has shown that children whose parents are involved in their education have more positive attitudes about learning; they have better attendance and show better homework habits than those whose parents are not involved (Epstein, 1985; Goldenburg, 1989).

Studies of general attitudes to education in Taiwan have shown that both the government and people of Taiwan have a high regard for formal education. Indeed, it has been suggested that education is the main engine that has successfully driven the rapid transformation of Taiwan from a basically agrarian to an industrial society (Law, 2002). This general positive disposition towards formal education is also reflected in the national spending allocation for education. Paragraph 10 in Article 10 of the Additional Articles of the

Constitution of the Republic of China² states that: “Priority shall be given to funding for education, science, and culture, and in particular funding for compulsory education, the restrictions in Article 164 of the Constitution notwithstanding.” The Law of Educational Budget Allocation and Management passed on November 28, 2000 further stipulates that, beginning in 2002, the educational budget shall not be less than 21.5% of the average of the 3 previous years (Government Information Office, 2003). The annual national budgetary vote on education currently tops other agendas in Taiwan. In the fiscal year 2001, for example, government spending for education exceeded 16.31 billion dollars, or about 5.89% of the GNP, with 4.22% allocated for public schools and 1.67% for private ones³.

Taiwanese parents’ regard for education is equally high, with the Confucian precept “a learned man is a good man” being the unwritten, golden tenet that guides most parents’ attitudes in the education of their children (Feng, 1994; Ho, 1987; Peng, 1993; Smith, 1981, 1992). It is assumed that any student can, and should, attain certain minimum educational standards, and as Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Kato, and Londo (1994) noted, most Taiwanese parents believe that “the secret of academic success lies in having devoted teachers and supportive parents—but most importantly in the hard work of the students themselves” (p. 55). This view is further supported by Morris (1996), who claims that the majority of Taiwanese believe that, with sufficient hard work, all pupils can succeed. In order to ensure the success of their children particularly in such a competitive educational environment, parents, therefore, often compel their children to work hard (Ho, 1987; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Huang & Chiu, 1991). They inculcate their children with the traditional Chinese respect for teachers (Liang, 1991; Liu, 1977), and they are willing to sacrifice and do everything possible to help their children get a good education (Peng, 1993). It is important to carefully examine the opinions and attitudes of Taiwanese parents towards bilingual education, given the highly positive attitudes they have towards education in general. More specifically, to what extent do parents agree with some of the issues involved in the frequent policy changes relating to bilingual education in the country? This is a crucial question in order to align parents’ and authority’s perceptions on the controversial issues and thereby evolve a stable grassroots-oriented language education policy in the country.

Objectives of Study

The study investigated parents’ opinions on six major aspects of bilingual education policies in Taiwan, some of which have also recently generated public debates. More specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. Which foreign language do parents prefer as a component of formal education?

2. When should English as a foreign language be introduced in the curriculum?
3. Does learning a foreign language have negative effects on the child's competence in his or her mother tongue?
4. Does learning a foreign language have negative effects on the child's knowledge of his or her native culture?
5. Should the government allow English as a foreign language to be taught in kindergarten?
6. Should the government employ foreign English teachers in elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan?

The above questions were motivated by one primary concern, namely, the perceived lack of parental involvement in educational planning and especially language education decisions in the country. Education reform policies of Taiwan, particularly those relating to language education, have undergone significant changes aimed at improving the quality of education. However, one notable aspect of these changes is that they are often a product of government's perceived needs of the governed, rather than emerging from a process of public debates or grassroots consultations. Thus, although Taiwan is a burgeoning democracy of a type not very common in many neighboring countries, many of its education policy decisions are only a little different from what one would expect from a benevolent dictator. Consequently, changes are often announced before the public has the opportunity to debate them, and it is only when such changes generate heated criticisms and arguments that the government often retraces its steps. Unfortunately, such an approach may result in the proverbial act throwing out the baby with the bath water. Furthermore, much of such post hoc debates are often dominated by the voices of prominent politicians, business tycoons, and privileged academics. Parents, in general, tend to be the silent majority whose children are mostly affected by these policy changes. Investigating parents' opinions on language education in Taiwan becomes very crucial especially since the overall success of any dynamic national education policy depends on how such a policy addresses the concerns of the citizens rather than the perceptions of the bureaucrats.

Method

One thousand one hundred and sixty Taiwanese parents participated in the study (659 males and 501 female). The participants had children in elementary, junior high, and senior high schools at the time of the study. They were randomly selected, based on the schools the researcher was able to access at the time. They also represented a wide geographical distribution covering the southern, central, and northern parts of the country. While the east coast of the country was not represented in the data, this limitation

should not significantly affect the results since that part is not in any way different from the rest of the country. Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize the respondents' age, education, and income distributions respectively. It was assumed that the parents' attitudes towards bilingualism would be influenced by certain characteristics, principal among which would be age, education, gender, and income. So these features were independently measured against each of the questions raised in this study.

A questionnaire was designed and translated to Chinese to elicit information from participants. The questionnaire was distributed to the parents

Table 1

Participants' Age Distribution

Age range (years)	Frequency	Percentage
20–30	12	1.0
31–40	339	29.2
41–50	735	63.3
51–60	66	5.7
61–70	8	0.7
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

Table 2

Participants' Educational Attainment

Educational attainment	Frequency	Percentage
No formal education	1	0.8
Elementary school	55	4.7
Junior high school	189	16.3
Senior high school	600	51.7
BA/BS (any field)	271	23.4
MA/MS (any field)	39	3.4
PhD (any field)	5	0.4
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

Table 3

Participants' Income Distribution

Monthly income range (NT\$/month)	Frequency	Percentage
Under 20,000	4	0.3
20,000–30,000	222	19.2
30,000–40,000	257	22.1
40,000–50,000	185	15.9
50,000–60,000	170	14.6
60,000–70,000	126	10.9
70,000–80,000	129	11.1
80,000–above	67	5.8
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

through their children in various schools. The same channel was used in collecting the questionnaire back from the parents. The researcher then went back to the schools to collect the information from the children on specified dates. While approximately 1,800 questionnaire sets were handed out, only about 1,200 were returned, of which 1,160 fully completed responses were analyzed, yielding a 64.4% return value.

Results

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

First, it was important to compare the responses across different age groups, educational attainment, and income levels in order to see the extent to which these factors affect the opinions of parents on each of the research questions. An ANOVA was employed to compare the means of these three factors.

Gender

No significant correlation was found between the participants' genders and their responses to any of the questions raised in this study. In other words, gender differences do not play any major role in parents' opinions on issues relating to the bilingual education of their children.

Age

The results showed that a significant correlation existed between parents' age and their opinions on whether learning a foreign language has negative effects on mother tongue competence. Older parents agreed more often than their younger counterparts that learning a foreign language would have a negative effect on the learner's competence in the mother tongue ($r = .078$, $p < .01$). No significant correlation was found between the parents' age and any of the other questions raised in this study.

Income distribution

The parents' income distribution significantly correlated with their opinions on the question of whether the government should allow English as foreign language to be taught in kindergarten ($r = .065$, $p < .05$). High income parents agreed more frequently with this view than did those who were on relatively lower income. Similarly, income distribution correlated to opinions on when English should be introduced in the curriculum. More specifically, more parents in the high income bracket (those earning NT\$50,000 and above per month) were of the view that English should be introduced to their children in kindergarten or in the first year of elementary school. Parents in the lower income bracket (below NT\$50,000 per month) tended to prefer late introduction, particularly in the third and fifth grades. A cross tabulation of the responses showed that parents' preferences differed significantly at both ends of the scale. For example, 31% of parents in the lower income bracket would like English to be introduced in the kindergarten curriculum, compared to 35% of those in the higher income bracket. Conversely, a higher proportion of parents in the lower income bracket (19%) would like English to be introduced only in the fifth grade, as opposed to 14% of those in the higher income bracket. This finding reflects the fact that learning English in Taiwan is cost intensive, and only those parents who can afford it prefer English to be introduced earlier in the curriculum, despite parents' general awareness of the personal and global advantages of learning the language. Income distribution did not have any major correlation with any of the other questions raised in this study.

Educational attainment

Participants' educational attainment correlated significantly with only one of the issues of concern in the study, namely, when English should be introduced in the curriculum. More educated parents were likely to believe that English should be introduced in kindergarten than less educated parents. For example, among parents without university education ($n = 846$), 263 (31%) felt that English should be introduced in kindergarten. In contrast, 36.6% of parents who had a university education ($n = 314$) felt that the foreign language should be introduced in kindergarten. Similarly, almost 20% of parents without a university education felt that the introduction of English

should be delayed until the fifth grade whereas only 11% of parents with a university education agreed with this position. Educational attainment of parents did not show any significant correlation to their opinions on any of the other questions raised in this study.

Descriptive Analysis

In order to gain further insights on the issues investigated in this study, it was necessary to carefully analyze the data descriptively as well. First, the data were examined in regard to each of the six questions earlier identified. Parents' views on each issue are presented below, followed by further explanations on the implications of these findings for the current state of bilingual education in Taiwan.

Preferred foreign language

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (95.3%) preferred that their children learn English as a foreign language. Only 3.4% and 1.3% preferred Japanese or French respectively. Nobody indicated any preference for Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, or Tagalog, three of the major languages spoken by Taiwan's nearest neighbors, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines respectively. Although the parents were not asked to state the reasons for their preferences, it is reasonable to assume that the choices reflected their perceived current and future relevance of these languages to national and global development, vis-à-vis the educational and social development of their children.

The parents' choice of English as the preferred foreign language seems to endorse the government's policy in this regard, namely to promote the learning of English towards creating a higher national level of communicative competence in the language. This principle is succinctly put in a recent policy plan known as "Challenge 2008: Education for a New Generation," which states in part:

. . . to meet the future challenges of globalization and internationalization, the ROC (Republic of China) should first enhance the abilities of its people. Consequently, the government will establish an environment for internationalizing learning. This project emphasizes the ability to master foreign languages, especially English, and the use of Internet. Since English is the language that links the world, the government should designate English as a quasi-official language and actively expand the use of English as a part of daily life. (Government Information Office, 2002)

Introduction of English in the curriculum

The question of when should a child be introduced to formal English learning has been one of the main issues in language education debates in

Table 4

Commencement of English Learning

When should English learning start?	Number of participants	Percentage
Kindergarten	379	32.7
First grade	206	17.8
Third grade	305	26.3
Fifth grade	202	17.4
Junior high school	68	5.9
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

Taiwan for a long time. Indeed, many of the recent policy changes to language education in the country have focused on this issue. The questions that arise are: What is the position of the parents? Do they think that their children should be exposed to English early or otherwise? Parents' answers to these questions may also provide insight into how popular the current practice of introducing English in the fifth year of elementary school is. Table 4 summarizes the findings in relation to this question.

As can be seen, a significant number of parents preferred early introduction to English as a foreign language, particularly at the kindergarten level (32.7%), or Grade 1 (17.8%). Only 17.4% of the respondents felt that the current practice of introducing students to a foreign language in the fifth grade was suitable. This finding indirectly throws some light on why kindergartens that offer English education are becoming more popular in the country, despite government's efforts to prohibit such schools. The implication of this finding is addressed later.

Effects of foreign language learning on mother tongue

Earlier in the literature review, it was noted that one of the arguments against early exposure to foreign language learning is that it would impact negatively upon the child's ability to fully master his or her mother tongue. Foreign language exposure is thought to not only increase the pressure on the child, but it also militates against full and effective mother tongue competence. It is also assumed that early exposure to foreign language may leave the child confused in respect to the systems of native and target languages, especially if the two languages have very little in common. For example, the Chinese-speaking child learning English is expected to confuse the grammatical and phonological structures of the two languages, thus

Table 5

Influence of Foreign Language Learning on Mother Tongue

Foreign language learning has negative influence on the mother tongue	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	77	6.6
Agree	236	20.3
Uncertain	268	23.1
Disagree	504	43.4
Strongly disagree	75	6.5
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

becoming incompetent in either language. It is important therefore to see if Taiwanese parents share this view. Do they agree that foreign language exposure is detrimental to the child's mother tongue acquisition?

As Table 5 clearly shows, approximately 50% of the parents expressed disagreement with the view that foreign language learning militates against mother tongue acquisition (43.4% disagreed, 6.5% strongly disagreed). Only about 30% of the parents expressed agreement with the position, with about 23% unsure. In a nutshell, therefore, the majority of the parents did not agree with the view that learning a foreign language is inimical to mother tongue acquisition.

Effects of foreign language learning on native culture

Table 6 shows that 58.8% of the respondents expressed disagreement with the proposition that foreign language learning negatively affects the child's knowledge of his or her native culture (52.0% disagreed, 6.8% strongly disagreed). Only 21% of the respondents indicated agreement with the view. The results also showed that when the two related issues of mother tongue and culture were juxtaposed, parents' views on how foreign language learning might affect native language and culture were not exactly the same. More parents seemed to believe that foreign language learning has little to do with knowledge of native culture. Obviously, parents did not always see native language and culture as two inseparable, Siamese twins. Hence, their responses about the possible effects of foreign language on one were not replicated on the other. Despite these differences, it is important to note that the number of

Table 6

Influence of Foreign Language Learning on Culture

Foreign language learning has negative influence on native culture	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	42	3.6
Agree	207	17.8
Uncertain	229	19.7
Disagree	603	52.0
Strongly disagree	79	6.8
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

Table 7

Teaching English in Kindergarten

English should be taught in kindergarten	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	118	10.2
Agree	482	41.6
Uncertain	206	17.8
Disagree	297	25.6
Strongly disagree	57	4.9
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

parents who were uncertain about the negative effects of foreign language learning on both the native language and culture were almost equal. In both cases, the majority of the participants tended to disagree with the propositions. These findings probably reflect the natural relationship between language and culture, as well as a mirror on people's attitudes towards both.

Teaching English in kindergartens

Earlier, the question of when should English be introduced in the curriculum was examined. The results showed that a significant number of the

Table 8

Foreign English Teachers in Elementary and Junior High Schools

Foreign English teachers should teach in elementary and junior high schools	Number of participants	Percentage
Strongly agree	56	4.8
Agree	411	35.6
Uncertain	305	26.0
Disagree	342	29.5
Strongly disagree	47	4.1
Total	1,160	100.0

Note. The sum of percentages does not equal to 100.0% due to rounding.

respondents preferred early introduction, at the kindergarten level, whereas the educational provisions in Taiwan currently makes English available to children only in the fifth grade. Table 7 shows that 51.8% of parents expressed agreement with the proposition that English should continue to be taught in kindergarten. Only 30.5% were opposed to the proposition. The foregoing results indicate that the majority of parents would like their children to be exposed to English in kindergarten. This also further reinforces the results displayed in Table 4, which shows that of the five suggested levels, the highest proportion of parents (32.7%) preferred the introduction of English in kindergarten.

Employing foreign English language teachers

The last issue addressed in this study was the question of whether the government should employ native speakers of English to teach in public elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan. Following the announcement early in 2003 that the government was about to embark on a foreign teachers' recruitment drive, this became a relevant issue in debates on language and education in the country ("Premier Yu," 2003)⁴. This was aimed at increasing the number of qualified English teachers in public schools so that the students' competence in English can improve in the long run. Do parents agree with this proposal?

Table 8 summarizes the responses to this question. Forty percent of the parents expressed agreement with the proposal (35.6% agreed, 4.8% strongly agreed), while almost 34% disagreed and 26% were uncertain. This rather wide distribution of responses clearly underscores the controversial nature

of the proposition. This result is also similar to the findings in another recent study conducted by the author in which it was found that most local English-language teachers in Taiwan are positively disposed to employing native speakers (see Oladejo, 2005).

Discussion, Implications, and Suggestions for Language Education and Planning in Taiwan

This study investigated parents' opinions on some current aspects of the language education policy in Taiwan, especially those relating to English. The results showed that most parents preferred English to any other foreign language as a component of their children's education. The study also found that a significant number of parents would like to see their children begin learning English as early as 4 or 5 years of age, as opposed to the current provision of 10 to 11 years of age. Two other findings of this study deserve highlighting. First, the majority of parents indicated that English should be taught formally in kindergarten, contrary to the government's attitudes on the situation. Second, parents were widely divided on the question of whether the government should employ native English speakers to teach in the public elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan, despite the popularity of such teachers in the country's private education sector.

It is relevant to add that at least three major concerns are fueling the ongoing debates on whether children should be exposed to English as early as kindergarten. First, parents and the government of Taiwan seem to be anxious that the level of English competence in the nation lags behind the international requirement for global competition. Numerous government official statements to that effect, as well as relevant sections of the current national development plan known as "Challenge 2008" point in this direction. For instance, in justifying why English should be used as a criterion for promoting government employees, the chief of the Central Personnel Administration, Lee Yiyang, was quoted in *The China Post* as saying:

Upgrading the English proficiency of Taiwan nationals is part of the 'Challenge 2008' program, a six-year national development plan proposed by the Executive Yuan in 2002 to maintain the country's competitive edge while archrival China continues to make leaps and bounds in economic development. ("Gov't Employees," 2004)

Consequently, parents and education authorities in Taiwan are faced with the need to increase the curriculum time and length of exposure to English in order to raise students' communicative competence in the language. Second, the government is aware of the need to ensure balanced psychological and emotional developments of children by minimizing the amount of learning pressure upon them because such pressure could be caused by early

introduction to foreign language learning. Third, there is a strong view that early foreign language learning may have negative effects on child's mother tongue acquisition and knowledge of native cultures. Despite lack of strong research evidence to support this view, it is difficult for education authorities to simply dismiss the arguments of those who feel that early introduction to foreign language would (a) result in untold hardship and learning pressure, and (b) create a situation in which there could be significant lack of competence in the indigenous languages and cultures of the child (see Chandler 2004; Chen, 2004; Wilbur, 2003).

In an apparent attempt to address these concerns, a new policy decision was announced by the Education Department in Taiwan (Sommer, 2004), which was aimed at prohibiting the teaching of English at the kindergarten and preschool levels. To that end, the government has reverted to the Preschool Education Law (1981) that promotes the view that late start offers some benefits for the child's overall personal and educational developments. Needless to say, such a law might be out of date or out of step with parents' desires. However, much of the evidence relating to the possibility of foreign language learning resulting in undue pressure for the child is based on anecdotes and conjectures, rather than on concrete research findings. To date, there are not many studies that have systematically measured the psychological of children who were exposed to early foreign language learning, or have compared these children with their regular counterparts on a long-term basis. Without exploring such issues systematically and thoroughly, it would be safe to claim that whether early exposure to foreign language creates pressure for the child depends on many factors. Among these would be the learning environment, the lesson content, teaching method, individual learner personality, motivation, learner attitudes, and aptitudes. The effects of early exposure to foreign language learning therefore need further exploration.

Another argument in support of prohibiting the teaching of English in preschool is that it would result in a loss of mother tongue competence and could alienate the child from his or her own culture and tradition. To put it in another way, it is assumed that the more foreign language a young learner masters, the less his or her ability in the native language would become. There is no strong research evidence to support this "reductive quantity" language acquisition hypothesis. If a child's capacity of the mother tongue reduces dramatically, many factors, including parental communication patterns with the child and the child's general linguistic environment, should be carefully examined. Merely learning a foreign language for a few hours in school everyday, as is the case in Taiwan, is not alone sufficient to reduce the child's competence in the mother tongue.

There have also been suggestions that children could be confused if they are exposed to a foreign language too early because the task of learning a foreign language is difficult and children are unable to separate onions from

apples (see, for example, Chang, 2002). Again, this argument finds strong support only in anecdotes, emotions, and passionate patriotism, rather than concrete research evidence. To say the least, it underestimates the capacity of the human brain to compartmentalize skills and to demarcate between linguistic structures.

In view of the foregoing findings, the following recommendations are made. First, there is a strong need for education authorities in Taiwan to conduct a thorough survey of public opinions on major language education policies prior to embarking upon such policies. Obviously, for a public policy to stand the test of time and be socially acceptable, such a policy should be in line with the perceptions of the public that it is meant to serve. Authorities see the strong need to embark upon policies that seem to be unpopular. However beneficial to society such policies may be, proper accountability requires that adequate explanation be given through public education and information about said policies. Many of the recent arguments about the education policy changes in Taiwan may be resolved through public education and information. Thus, while not expecting that every government policy would be popular or that the public must always be consulted prior to making every policy decision, there is often so much at stake, especially if major changes are made to bilingual education policies without public consultation.

Second, the findings of this study showed that recent proposed changes to lower the English-language entry age (from the current elementary Grade 5 to 3) was a step in the right direction. As shown earlier, opportunities for English-language learning and use are limited to the school environment, therefore, parents hope that their children receive early exposure to the language in order to maximize the learning period. Increasing the learning time would therefore go a long way to enhance the students' skills in the language. By the same token, any move to prohibit the teaching of English in kindergarten will be contradictory to the real objective of lowering the age of introduction to the language. How can the government acknowledge the need to increase the opportunity for exposure to the language on the one hand and at the same time prohibit genuine avenues for such opportunities, which teaching English in kindergartens provides? Indeed, such a move will not only be counterproductive and out of tune with parental desires, but it may also be retrogressive from the point of view of global trends and demands for the language. Rather than totally prohibit the teaching of English in kindergartens, the education authorities should explore avenues for increasing exposure to the language, as well as minimizing any negative effects that such exposure might have on the learning of native languages and culture by children. In particular, kindergartens should be compelled to ensure that not only English language and culture is taught but also Chinese language and culture is emphasized as part of the total language curriculum. In other words, truly bilingual exposure should be given to the children in kindergartens, as opposed to the current situation in which some private kindergartens tend to promote

the teaching and learning of English at the expense of mother tongue and culture. This would further allay the fears of those who argue that overexposure to English might result in a significant gap in children's knowledge of the local language and culture. To simply prohibit the teaching of English in kindergartens would amount to the proverbial act throwing out the baby with the bath water.

One final suggestion, that arises directly from the findings of this study, is that the government should consider the possibility of teaching English beginning the first year of elementary school in order to increase both the opportunities for exposure to the language, and further increase the learners' competence. It is well known that many students are already exposed to English in kindergarten. Yet, when they enter elementary school, their contact with the language is completely stopped in the formal education system until they are in the third year. The first 2 years of elementary school during which students do not learn the language is an unnecessary gap and it may damage the foundation formed in kindergarten. As we have seen, the majority of parents are keen to have their children exposed to English in kindergarten. What then is the advantage of waiting for another 2 years before building on the foundation formed during kindergarten? Unless the facilities and workforce necessary for teaching English from the first grade in elementary school are not yet in place, there is no justification for the lacunae caused by the 2 years. In a nutshell, learning English should begin the first year in the elementary school.

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Endnotes

- ¹ *Taiwan Year Book*, 2005, p. 1.
- ² In July 1997, the National Assembly passed a revision to Paragraph 10, Article 10, of the Additional Articles of the Constitution of the Republic of China, which gives funding for education, science and culture a significant share of the annual budget allocation. This provision gives compulsory education higher priority funding within the education budget. It also removes the minimum expenditure requirements for different levels of the government as required in Article 164 of the Constitution. *Taiwan Year Book*, 2005, chap. 18.
- ³ Government Information Office, Republic of China, *Taiwan Year Book*, 2004.
- ⁴ The newspaper reported as follows: “Premier Yu Shyi-kun is trying to jump start a campaign to turn English into a second official language, ordering that all major policy plans be submitted to the Cabinet in both Chinese and English. In a drive to boost Taiwan’s globalization and increase its ability to take part in international activities, all major plans drafted by government agencies should be presented in both languages, Yu said.”