

Learning English in Taiwan's Elementary Schools*

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Abstract

The learning of English is a significant education policy issue in Taiwan. The government of Taiwan tries hard to improve students' English language competence. When policy-makers launch a policy on learning, they need to consider both external and internal learning factors at the same time. The external aspect deals with the reasons for the learning: learning for use in day-to-day life or specifically for a test. The internal part concerns those people most affected by the policy – i.e. students and teachers. In this paper, I explore the English-learning policy of New Taipei City in Taiwan, by reference to both its external and internal parts. I then use futures studies methods to discover some alternative futures in English learning – concluding that the preferred future is "Gaming English", with the learning focused on students and on using English in daily life. To bring this preferred future about, I suggest some policies to help teachers change their teaching methods in order to achieve sustainable futures.

Keywords: learning English, elementary school, alternative futures, Causal layered analysis, vision

English-learning Development in Taiwan

Because of convenient, high speed transportation and globalization, as well as the internet and programs/applications such as Skype and others, there are increasing opportunities for communication between people all over the world. English is the most widely-spoken language in the world today, being the 'common currency' for most international transactions and communication. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has as its policy that students learn English from elementary school

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onward to improve their ability to communicate. Each of the core aspects of language learning are emphasized – reading, writing, listening and speaking (Ministry of Education, 2008). The authority has therefore started to administer English proficiency tests to make sure students obtain basic English ability. The tests put parents, students and teachers under pressure (Chan, 2004). However, many students are encouraged to take them to prove they are learning well (Chang, 2006).

The former mayor of New Taipei City insisted that the ability to write and speak in English is an international core competency. Pursuant to this, every school in New Taipei City had to add three different types of English-oriented classes for students to the original standard English classes. However, fifth and sixth grade students' learning hours are now longer than those of junior high school students, and these longer hours have created heavy stress for students and teachers to the point that about four thousand students, parents and teachers demonstrated against the policy on May 16th, 2010. They argued that children should spend their time on activities other than learning English at school.

The aim of policy-makers in Taiwan was to help students improve their ability to use English to communicate with others in daily life. Students try hard to get better grades to show their success in learning. But can English-learning policy in Taiwan help students create a better communication future?

Mapping the Future

Inayatullah's (2007) model of the futures landscape may help us to see the level at which Taiwan's policy is operating. The first level is the jungle, a competitive world in which the goal is only to survive. The jungle level focuses on size, speed, smartness and external technologies. The second level is the chess set; strategy, including core competencies and capacities, helps us to know which future is the most appropriate. The third level is the mountain tops, the 'big picture' via which alternative futures can be explored. The fourth level is the star, the vision of the future (Inayatullah, 2007).

Achieving better grades is a jungle level concern. Analyzing the core competencies is at the chess set level in the futures landscape. Taiwan used to compete with other countries in education rankings. The English-learning policy in New Taipei City tried to progress to the second level. However, a better policy will do more. It is important to have several futures scenarios in which to see something different and new; this is at the third level, the mountain tops. Building on these scenarios, we can move to the fourth level, the star, the vision of the future. This level helps us to develop long-term goals through which to create the preferred future.

After analysing the external factors of English-learning policies, we need to consider their internal aspects: this internal part concerns the people who are to be most affected by these policies – that is, students and teachers.

Digital Natives

Students in Taiwan play computer games, watch lots of TV and like to surf the net. They learn a great deal from these media, and they like to discuss what they learn.

Sometimes they share their ideas or feelings on their blogs. Instead of face-to-face communication, students ask questions and chat using electronic platforms (Wu, 2009).

These are people who were born into a digital environment. They gather information from TV, computers, the internet, videogames, cell phones, and other digital tools. They like to multi-task: learn things online, chat with their friends (using programs like MSN) and listen to music at the same time. They prefer to collect information from websites; Facebook, personal blogs, and microblogs, if they are interested in a particular area of research (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

Digital natives (Prensky, 2001a & 2001b) prefer graphics-first to text-first, and games to serious work; and they receive information fast by networking. Their brains and thinking patterns develop differently from those who are not digital natives. Digital natives are accustomed to speed and interactivity. Their cognitive structures are parallel instead of sequential, and their attention spans are short for old ways of learning (ibid). Students need more fun, more activity, more graphics, non-text learning styles and immediate feedback. They can do deep research on the internet instead of reading books in the library. However, most students in Taiwan have more elaborate and detail-filled English classes, perhaps more appropriate to older, more lengthy learning styles.

Digital Immigrants

Those who were not born in the digital environment but came to it later in their lives are called digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001a & 2001b). They learn things step-by-step, one thing at a time, and seriously. Most educators or teachers today are digital immigrants, who did not think that the human brain would ever change. They use old thinking styles, based on the ways they learned in the past, to teach the digital natives who have different thinking patterns (Prensky, 2001a & 2001b). Some digital immigrants even distrust modern technology. They think that memorizing is the best way for every learner (Prensky, 2008).

In Taiwan, most teachers are digital immigrants and have to learn to adapt to the digital environment. Some of them are afraid of using computers and try to avoid using technology whenever possible (Liang, & Wang, 2009). Some of them learn to use technology well, but they still require students to learn in traditional ways, such as memorizing. For these teachers, it is easier to teach in traditional ways because they don't have the time or skills to design an information-integrated curriculum (Hsieh, 2004).

Before developing the futures vision, we need therefore to generate/consider alternative futures in order to broaden the concepts of learning and teaching and help us prepare for unforeseen contingencies.

Alternative Futures

Scenarios are used in the process of creating alternative futures. The double variable matrix is a method in which two critical uncertainties must be identified to devel-

op four worlds (Inayatullah, 2007). In using this model to develop scenarios for Taiwan's English-learning futures, I take the external and the internal factors as two uncertainties.

The critical uncertainties for the scenario are:

1. Internal: would education be teacher-centered or student-centered?
2. External: would policy-makers in the Ministry of Education focus on communicating in daily life (learning-based) or on getting higher grades in tests (test-based)?

Building on external and internal factors the matrix in Figure 1 (below) was developed.

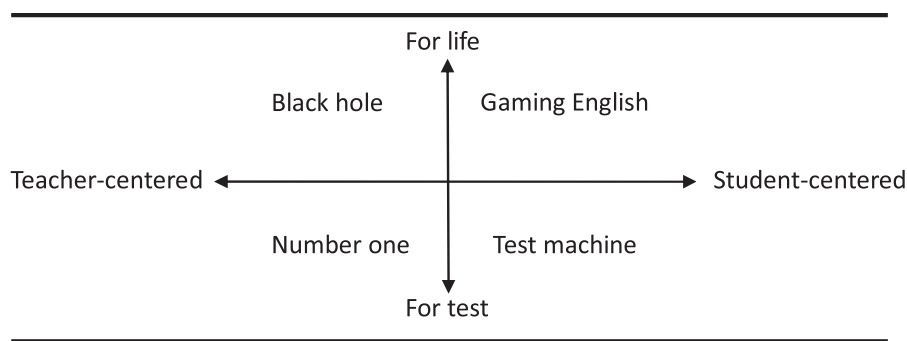


Figure 1. Matrix of learning English

The first variable is the internal factors: student-centered or teacher-centered education. Student-centered education is focused on developing learning methods which students enjoy and find useful. Otherwise, students are taught as the teachers think best. The second variable is the external factors; whether the goal of learning English is to be able to use it in life or merely for passing tests. There are four scenarios:

1. **Black hole:** Teachers try to help students develop English skills in real life. They teach students in traditional ways, under which students learn slowly. Because of inefficiencies, teachers need to increase learning hours, to allow for more practice, while trying to help students use English fluently in writing, reading, listening and speaking.
2. **Gaming English:** Teachers use game-based learning styles to help students learn well and happily, using high-technology to help students fulfill their potential. The aim is to create an English-embedded environment in which English is used for communication as much as possible.
3. **Number one:** To make their students number one in the education rankings, teachers focus on students' grades in English tests and only care about the global rankings. Students practice tests to gain better grades, and teachers teach students how to get good grades.
4. **Test machine:** Teachers use high-technology to attract students' attention. Students learn English and practice to get higher grades by using high-tech materials.

An additional scenario of learning English is the Chinese new world: Students stop learning English because people in Taiwan think Mandarin will be the most widely spoken language in the future. In looking to the preferred future, we need to understand the deep parts of futures first. In the next section, I use causal layered analysis to deepen these possible futures.

Causal Layered Analysis

Causal layered analysis (CLA) is a method used to deepen futures. CLA consists of four levels: the litany, systemic causes, discourse/worldview, and myth/metaphor. The litany level is quantitative trends, short-term solutions which are easy to grasp. The systemic causes level usually needs experts who can give technical explanations and perform academic analysis. Deeper is the discourse/worldview level: the task here is to unpack unconscious worldviews and cultural structures. The deepest level is myth/metaphor; the unconscious emotive dimensions of the issue (Inayatullah, 2004).

To deepen the possible futures of the English-learning policy, I use CLA to unpack the five scenarios I proposed in the previous section.

1. **Black hole** (Table 1): teacher-centered and students learn English for use in daily life. Teachers add learning hours so that students can practice more, and to make sure students develop each of the four aspects of their English skills. Division of a complete curriculum into several parts comes at the systemic causes level. At the worldview level, teachers use a standard teaching method and learning is from 8 to 5. The myth is that people who put in more effort will gain more.

Table 1. *Applying causal layered analysis to black hole*

CLA 1	Black hole
Litany	Increase English-oriented classes.
Systemic causes	Divide English-learning into discrete parts, such as writing, reading, listening and speaking, and practice all of them at school.
Discourse/ worldview	Industrial education: students will have good English ability after long hours of learning; and learning done in a standard way.
Myth/ metaphor	More is better.

2. **Gaming English** (Table 2): student-centered and students learn English for use in daily life. At the litany level students are helped to use English in their daily lives. Students are now digital natives; they are comfortable with using technology. Teachers use technology to help students learn English. At the worldview level international education means students can use English to learn and to communicate with people around the world. At the myth level is the concept that life is the source of education – that it is unnecessary to sit in the classroom to learn. Students can learn English in their lives.

Table 2. *Applying causal layered analysis to gaming English*

CLA 2	Gaming English
Litany	Use English as much as possible in students' daily lives.
Systemic causes	E-learning: Use different, high-tech tools to stimulate students' interest.
Discourse/ worldview	International education: Communicate and learn all over the world in English.
Myth/ metaphor	Life is education.

3. **Number one** (Table 3): teacher-centered and students learn English for tests or exams. Teachers use traditional methods and ask students to memorize for the purpose of taking tests. At the systemic causes level, teachers emphasize test materials only. It does not matter whether students use English in their daily lives or not: highest grades equals the best. The worldview is focused on competency (in a global marketplace) and on Taiwan reaching a higher ranking in the world. The unconscious meaning, the myth level, is that Taiwan has a successful English education system. In other words, Taiwan excels in world competencies.

Table 3. *Applying causal layered analysis to Number one*

CLA 3	Number one
Litany	More tests, more cram learning.
Systemic causes	Teachers teach students test materials in order for them to get better grades.
Discourse/ worldview	Globalizational competency. Compete with other countries to have higher grades.
Myth/ metaphor	Taiwan is good.

4. **Test machine** (Table 4): student-centered and students learn English for tests. The first level is to help students to practice for tests in order to get higher grades. At the systemic causes level, teachers build test systems online for students to practice. Students respond well to the digital environment, and they can practice with many different test systems or websites in order to get better grades. The worldview is market capitalism. Students with higher grades in English can compete with other people for good jobs in the wider world. Therefore, at the myth level, students who have high grades will have a good job or may be more successful in the future than those whose test-demonstrated English skills are poorer.

Table 4. *Applying causal layered analysis test machine*

CLA 4	Test machine
Litany	More practice and tests.
Systemic causes	E-testing: Use high-technology to practice more and improve test ability.
Discourse/ worldview	Market capitalism: Compete with other countries' graduates for good jobs
Myth/ metaphor	Grades predict level of success in the future.

5. **The Chinese new world** (Table 5): People in Taiwan think Mandarin will be the most widely spoken language in the future, so learning English is not important. People all over the world will increasingly learn Mandarin for communicating with Chinese and Taiwanese people. At the first level, teachers gradually stop teaching English and students gradually stop learning English. Taiwanese people speak and publish books in Mandarin only. The worldview is imperialist education. China will be a strong nation in the world. The myth here is that China is the strongest country in the world.

Table 5. *Applying causal layered analysis to the Chinese new world*

CLA 5	The Chinese new world
Litany	Stop learning English.
Systemic causes	Speak and publish only in Mandarin.
Discourse/ worldview	Imperialist education: Every country gives up its own culture and language, and just learns Chinese.
Myth/ metaphor	China as a "Middle Kingdom".

Vision

In the following discussion, I try to identify which vision is the preferred one of English-learning.

More tests and longer hours of practice make students, teachers and parents feel more anxious. Students have fewer opportunities to speak and listen, and they may feel frustrated when paper tests are more frequent (Chang, 2006). The "number one" and "test machine" visions emphasize testing and practice as means to get better grades; however, they may cause anxiety and frustration for students, and therefore are not good solutions for learning English.

Images and language presented in digital multimedia material make learning more effective for students. Digital technology can attract students' attention and inspire their learning via interactive feedback (Choul, 2008). Yeh & Che (2004) found that students may learn English, willingly and efficiently, by using game-based learning via digital technology. They can use computers and learn at home and discuss what they are learning with their classmates online. They can learn while enjoying games

together. Therefore, "gaming English" leads to better learning than the "black hole". Teachers need to change their mindset to face futures, and they need to use digital technology tools instead of text alone in order to help students learn well and happily. However, teachers in Taiwan seldom integrate information technologies (IT) into teaching. Teachers need more support (Chang & Weng, 2006); they need more educational software, accessible hardware, computer integration knowledge, and skills to apply computers to teaching (Tsuei, 2001).

The Chinese new world is not an appropriate vision to present a better future: people need diverse cultures and values to help create a sustainable future. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, may help people think outside their culture and create a richer society (Inayatullah, 2006). Cultural diversity can help human society to survive, and to understand things in different ways (Gidley, 2008).

From all of the above, the preferred vision is "gaming English": student-based and for real-life application. Students learn English so they can use it in life and not simply to pass tests. However, the government is currently making policies that resemble the "black hole" and "number one" scenarios. These two scenarios are opposed to the preferred vision of "gaming English".

Transforming

Where there are two conflicting visions, Johan Galtung's transcend method is a good way forward (figure 2). It can help us create a win-win situation. First, two different visions should be detailed. An integrated vision is created after a process of brainstorming and alternative-creating. In one case study, undertaken by Inayatullah, one group chose the green city and another group chose the modern glamour city: visions which are in obvious conflict. Through the transcend process, those who preferred the green city realized the city they wanted would be boring and that they needed a modern dimension to their city to help them innovate. On the other hand, the modern city proponents knew that there would be no development without sustainability. Each needed the other (Inayatullah, 2008a).

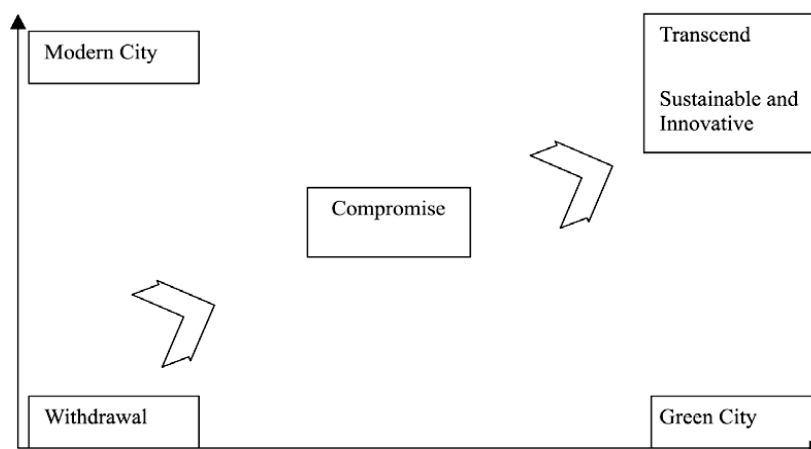


Figure 2. The transcend method (Source: Inayatullah, 2008a, p.19)

Applying the method to the 'Number one', 'Black hole' and 'Gaming English' scenarios, I create a different situation. Using traditional teacher-centered pedagogy for students may result in heavy pressure and inefficient learning. Students, as digital natives, want something fun which uses technology as a friend to help them learn. More paper tests also make students, parents and teachers feel anxious. Using student-centered pedagogy may cause heavy stress for teachers. Though students like the digital environment, and teachers need digital technology to improve students' learning, students also need traditional paper-reading skills to acquire different thinking styles (Tapscott, 2008/2009). Learning is not just for tests, but tests are a convenient way to assess students' learning. Each pedagogy needs the other.

Policy

To balance learning for life and for tests, teachers could encourage students to use English in their life when students are younger than third-grade. After fourth-grade, students have to learn grammar and phrases which can help them in their lives but which are also useful for tests.

To balance student-centered and teacher-centered pedagogies, teachers could try to use technology in some classes. Instead of increasing learning hours, however, teachers need support to change pedagogies. First of all, teachers need to understand the differences between digital natives and digital immigrants. The Ministry of Education could provide training programs for teachers once a week, instead of adding three English classes at that time, in collaboration with IT companies. The companies could provide instructors to teach teachers how to use IT tools, while the teachers would design curricula and communicate with those companies. Companies could then develop e-books or games connected to learning materials for students and combine those materials with cloud computing technology so that they were available to teachers and students everywhere. Teachers could use the materials developed in class, and students could practice or do homework online after class. Third, the Ministry of Education could provide platforms where teachers could share their teaching plans and ask for help in a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment of their own. Fourth, there could be ongoing development of training programs for teachers so that they can learn from each other and continuously improve. These steps can help teachers reduce their anxiety and the pressure they are under to use technology. Teachers may save much time preparing learning materials if the e-learning systems were set up. The e-learning systems may include some grammar and phrases for helping improve students' ability.

For the sake of students, teachers could have a communicative platform with English games, songs, videos, e-books and other learning materials; students might, for example, need to read the contents and listen to the songs in English on the web. Teachers could also introduce some hardcopy books for students and encourage them to share their thoughts and homework in English on a joint blog. Every student could communicate with every other via MSN or Skype, and learn from each others' homework. Teachers may also offer some web hours with students and check the platform to assess students' learning. Teachers and students could discuss what students share

on the blog in class. Instead of putting a lot of effort into achieving good grades, students would use English freely in daily communication: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Students' English ability will improve if they use English as much as possible.

Conclusion

Learning English is important in Taiwan, so a long term learning project is necessary. Increasing learning hours may be useful as a transition stage, but is not a sustainable solution. Adding classes exhausts students and teachers. Language skills are likely to improve if people use them as much as possible in their daily lives. Since today's students are interested in digital tools, teachers can use technology to create an environment where students can learn English in a natural way without pressure – using interactive technologies that can inspire digital natives. Teaching English through games, instead of adding classes, means teachers may spend their time better on designing curricula and on self-improvement. The win-win situation is a curriculum designed for achieving the required language skills. Helping students get used to an English environment is a sustainable way of learning for both students and teachers.

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