6. ETHNIC CULTURAL LEGACIES AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A Social-Cultural Study in Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

Learning English in Taiwan has become a primary economic concern as industries have recognized the need to compete within global markets in which trade is predominantly carried out in English. The growth in demand for, and supply of, English language education in school settings is escalating. The National Curriculum of Primary and Secondary Schools (Grades 1-9) in Taiwan designated English as a school subject as early as primary level grade 5 (age 10) in 2001 and introduced it even earlier, in grade 3 in 2005 reflecting a public recognition of the importance of learning English. Although English has gained in prestige in Taiwan, pupils from different geographical regions and various social groups achieve differently in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) measured by national tests. National data from the Basic Competence Test for Junior High Pupils taken at age 14, consistently demonstrate a substantial gap in English achievement between candidates living in urban and rural locales. For decades, the dominant explanation of the ‘urban-rural divide’ guiding policy debates was of resource disparity between urban and rural regions. This study will challenge this simplistic explanation of groups’ differential achievement in EFL.

This study was guided by socio-cultural work (Abreu, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Wenger, 1998) which recognizes that EFL involves situated practices that cannot be dislocated from local as well as wider cultural arenas. It intents to broaden theories of EFL learning by recognizing that pupils’ learning has to be situated within broader frames of analysis including the political, institutional, local and ethnic cultural contexts in which individuals encounter English. The paper explores two substantive issues; (1) differences between ethnic groups’ situated experiences of, and access to, English, (2) the relationship between ethnic group cultures in four groups (Hokkien, Chinese Mainlander, Hakka and indigenous people) and experiences of American and Anglo culture.

Research on pupils’ experiences of learning English from a socio-cultural perspective requires an investigation of different planes of analysis (Rogoff, 1995, 2003) in order to uncover the complex issues, such as ethnic, home and community

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culture that influence access to English language learning. This chapter will argue that ethnic cultures provide pupils in Taiwan with different socio-cultural resources that influence their access to Anglo-American English language in schools. First, the paper begins with a brief overview of EFL learning in Taiwan. It will then describe aspects of the ethnic culture of four groups and its impact on learning English. Third, a description of the socio-cultural methodological approach employed in this study will be provided and will focus primarily on one of the instruments, a questionnaire adapted from Scribner and Cole’s (1981) study of language use in Liberia. Findings will be used to explore how some groups come to school already better equipped to access Anglo-American English than other groups. Implications for this will be discussed for EFL teaching and learning in Taiwan.

CONTEXT OF EFL IN TAIWAN

English has played a pivotal role in the education history of Taiwan (Huang, 1993). In recent years, Taiwanese society has been subjected to far reaching, rapid economic change; for example, its entry into WTO (World Trade Organization) in 2002 has led to increased economic cooperation and trade exchange between Taiwan and the other 145 countries in the world community (WTO News, 2001). It became the world’s fifteenth largest trading country in 2004 (BFT, Taiwan, 2004). Learning English as an international language has become vital to its economy in terms of providing access to the world community, viewed as one of the keys to success in Taiwan’s economic globalization and modernization. It is generally believed that speaking better English fuels upward occupational and social mobility. The pressure to develop better English competence is fierce among learners at each school level. At pre-school stages, common slogans, such as ‘do not fail your children at the starting point in learning English’ have fuelled growth in ‘bilingual’ or ‘whole English’ kindergartens. The Curriculum of Elementary and Junior High School Education (Grade 1-9) required by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan in 2001 has designated English as a school subject as early as primary level grade 5 and lowered it further to grade 3 and 4 in 2005 (MOE, Taiwan, 2005) although some schools have taught English at grade 1 and 2 for some time in response to parental expectation and pressure.

ETHNIC CULTURES IN TAIWAN

Taiwan is an island with an ethnically mixed population composed mainly of Hokkien (69%), Hakka (15%), Chinese Mainlander (14%), and indigenous people (2%). These social groups have specific ethnic cultural variations that are particularly pivotal for our understanding of how value is attached to English language learning. The four social groups, which will be considered in turn, have different geographic and historical roots.

The Hokkien people (or called ‘Minan Zen’) migrated from China some three hundred years ago. They are the largest social and business-trading group in