CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Motivation

In Taiwan, the government tries to create an English-friendly environment to expose people to English. Therefore, while walking on the streets, you can see lots of English signs and posters. The environmental print, of course, also appears in educational places such as schools. This is a good opportunity for children to learn from the environment. Tao and Robinson (2005) stated that children exposed in a print-rich environment would help to develop children's literacy. Therefore, "print-rich environments are usually recommended as part of instructional efforts that schools can support for functional literacy for children" (p.353). The policy of creating an English-friendly environment is just compatible with children's need for English learning.

In an EFL learning environment, the input of English from the environment for students is not as rich as in an ESL environment. In an EFL environment, the lack of the target language input is a common phenomenon. Luckily, in recent years, more and more English signs and words have appeared in the immediate environment. Students' reactions to environmental print are quite different. Some might stop and have a discussion; some just walk by without paying any attention. As an elementary school English teacher, I am wondering if students' attitudes and behavior towards environmental print (EP) have anything to do with their grade or their learning attitudes towards English and if environmental print (EP) rouses students' curiosity in English. All these motivate me to go for an investigation. While I search for the literature, I found little research has been done on investigating the effectiveness of environmental print (EP) in an EFL school environment.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, the investigation focused on the environmental print posted on campus of elementary schools. Therefore, ESEP stands for Elementary School Environmental Print. The purpose of this study is to investigate the design of ESEP in the school under study and its effect in language learning and teaching. The designs of school setting (environment) normally have educational meanings. Based on the theory of brain-based learning, more stimuli from the environment will enhance children's brain and cognition development. Since ESEP is a part of the learning environment which may have an impact on students, it is quite important to make an investigation to have a clear idea or clue about what influence has been aroused by ESEP to students? Who designed ESEP and what is the rationale behind the design? How do teachers make use of ESEP? Does ESEP catch students' attention? How do they view ESEP? Does ESEP help students' learning or facilitate teachers' teaching? Can students spontaneously pick up the target language from ESEP without teachers' instruction? Is this the so-called autonomous language learning? Being an elementary school teacher, I am eager to find out the answers. With these answers, we might work out how to improve teaching and enhance students' learning.

Research Questions

According to the purpose of this study, the research questions are as follows:

1. Who designed ESEP and what is the rationale behind the design?

2. How do teachers make use of ESEP?

3. How do students react to ESEP? Is there any difference between the students in terms of their genders, grades and language proficiency?

4. What do students learn from ESEP?

Significance of the Study

Learning environment plays a crucial role in learning. Many researchers (Assink, 1994; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Morrow, 1989) mentioned that rich input of target language materials will be one of the essential factors to language learning. For most EFL students, the school is the most important even the only one place where they get the opportunities to access to the target language and develop their literacy. Through this investigation, the researcher intends to find out the rationale behind the design of ESEP and the effectiveness of ESEP towards language learning and teaching. With the data collected from the investigation, the researcher tries to give suggestions to teachers about ESEP and English teaching and learning and tries to give advice about the design of ESEP.

Definition of Terms

Environmental print (EP). "Environmental print is the print found in the natural immediate environment of children, which includes logos, labels, road signs, billboards, clothing labels, coupons, newspaper advertisements, and fast food paraphernalia" (Kuby & Aldridge, 2004, p.106). In the present study, EP is defined as the printing materials decorated on campus: for instance, English words, sentences, wall papers and posters decorated on the hallway, stairs, toilet doors, and other public areas on campus.

Learner autonomy. According to Holec (1981), autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). In other words, autonomous learners would have knowledge and skills to make appropriate choices and have enough motivation and confidence to take responsibility of learning.