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## English-only Instruction in Post-secondary Education in Taiwan: Voices from Students

### Abstract

The internationalization of higher education in Taiwan has become a trend since Taiwan entered the World Trade Organization (WTO). One of the most popular internationalizing mechanisms for Taiwan is to provide English-taught courses in postsecondary education. Despite its proliferation, we rarely have empirical studies on its effectiveness, which is particularly important since Vinke et al. (1998) found that the effects of using English as the only medium of teaching to facilitate one's language abilities and international understanding were not totally positive. This paper thus aims to report student voices regarding English-Only instruction in one department in a comprehensive, private university in Taiwan. Ten student interviews were conducted. Data were analyzed by Carspecken's (1996) reconstructive analysis. The results showed delicate complexity between positive and negative learning effects. The students perceived English improvement in terms of listening, vocabulary and confidence, while they expressed worries about a loss in their acquisition of professional knowledge. In addition to teachers' clarity and expressiveness, students' language ego, intrinsic motivation, proficiency levels and time for adjustment also account for learning effectiveness. Although the results are inconclusive, the complicated factors emerging from student data, I believe, function as a preliminary step for an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of English-only instruction and the anticipated future internationalization of higher education in Taiwan.

### Keywords

Internationalization, English-Only Instruction, and Higher Education

黃怡萍

## 台灣高等教育中全英語教學之研究：傾聽學生的聲音

### 摘要

自從台灣加入世界貿易組織後，高等教育國際化便蔚為風行，而其中『全英語教學』是最常被視為提升教育國際化的策略。雖然大學提倡『全英語教學』已引起廣泛討論，但是針對其實施效果的實徵研究在台灣並不多見，而早在1998年荷蘭學者便發現全英語教學之缺失 (Vinke et al., 1998)，因而提出使用『全英語教學』的教師需要在不同教學場域下能使用英語去正確解釋教材並傳達學科知識。本文旨在藉由瞭解十位學生在一所台灣私立大學『全英語教學』之學習狀況與觀點，以促進日後台灣高等教育之國際化。研究之資料來源主要是針對十位在語言相關學系就讀的學生所進行半結構式之訪談錄音。分析方式則採 Carspecken (1996) 之『再建構分析法』 (reconstructive analysis)。研究結果初步顯示學生雖懷疑『全英語教學』影響其專業知能之深度與廣度的吸收，卻也表示自己在英語聽力、字彙與表達的自信方面有所增長。根據學生的意見，本研究也發現使用『全英語教學』的教師，在課程安排與教學上，除需注意 Vinke et al. (1998) 所提學習之認知方面，也要留心情意部分，以加強學生之學習效果。

### 關鍵字

高等教育國際化、全英語教學

## English-only Instruction in Post-secondary Education in Taiwan: Voices from Students

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Internationalization has become an inevitable feature of contemporary curriculum design in the development of postsecondary education in the era of globalization. As the global academics cannot sidestep the influence of international competitiveness and/or cooperation, so Taiwan has established “a sufficient degree of internationalization” as a required characteristic of quality higher education (e.g., White Paper on Higher Education, 2003). One of the popular mechanisms for internationalizing higher education in Taiwan is the provision of English-medium courses in postsecondary education (see Sauve, 2002). This addresses the need of creating a welcome environment for foreign (exchange) students and scholars, increasing students’ English proficiency, and enabling students to study abroad (since most communication in academia requires English as a lingua franca). According to Tsai’s (2004) survey of 117 Taiwan institutes, 60% of universities and colleges offered courses taught in English. Indeed, the global spread of English through postsecondary pedagogy offered in English has become a trend in higher education.

Although the importance of internationalizing higher education has gained widespread recognition, it is often criticized for its hegemony, homogenization, and commodification (see de Wit, 2002; Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005) due to the colonialism of Western capitalism and English as a global mechanism for communication, technological use, and cultural development (e.g., Liao, 2004; Phillipson, 1999; Yang, 2001). Under this circumstance, English is no longer a neutral, international communication tool, but it represents an ideological mechanism that bourgeois (or the advantaged) systematically employ to perpetuate (or even exacerbate) inequality.

Aside from the ideological critique, I cannot help but wonder about the effectiveness of English-taught courses. Yet to my knowledge, there is no empirical research on this topic in Taiwan. I found only two studies directly related to the reality of English-taught courses in postsecondary education in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context: Vinke et al. (1998) found a majority of the Dutch teachers hardly experienced any differences between teaching in English and in their mother tongue. Yet the Dutch teachers who taught English-medium content

courses might have heavier workload and require more preparation time, and might not teach as effectively as they had expected since their students perceived a loss in educational quality. Also, they found that redundancy, expressiveness, and clarity impacted student learning. Thus, these scholars argue that those who teach content areas in English should have three qualifications: (a) language flexibility (i.e., the ability to teach in different educational situations), (b) accuracy (i.e., the ability to teach content accurately through English), and (c) redundancy (i.e., the ability to explain or rephrase teaching materials). Indeed, the previous empirical research shows an intricate connection between student learning and teacher instruction, which is congruent with Xiao's (2006) warning of the negative impact of overemphasizing internationalizing higher education.

Due to the lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of English-only courses in postsecondary in Taiwan, this paper reports how college students view English-only or English-taught courses in one comprehensive, private university in Taiwan with an aim to better facilitate student learning in the future.

## STUDY

In order to understand student voices regarding English-taught courses, I am conducting a qualitative case study (see Merriams, 2002) in one department in the target university. The qualitative approach is undertaken since most discussion/research concerning internationalizing higher education in Taiwan has conducted a documentary analysis (e.g., Xiao, 2006), comparative analysis (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2006), quantitative analysis (e.g., Chuang, 2007; Xiao, 2006), or theoretical argumentation (e.g., Chang, 2006). Although these quantitative approaches provide us with a general understanding of internationalizing higher education, the lack of in-depth understanding of contextual factors call for the use of qualitative research methodology.

### Participants & Context

This study is being conducted in one department on the target campus characterized by an international and global outlook. Purposive sampling (Glense, 2007) was used: this particular site was chosen because of the commitments to internationalizing higher education, uniqueness in Taiwan higher education, and its accessibility to the researcher. From 1994 the university has implemented the Junior Year Abroad Program. Two colleges of a new campus in this target university established in 2005 require that all the courses be taught in English. The policy stipulates (1) that all juniors at this campus must study abroad for one year

and (2) that more than 90% of the curriculum is taught in English. Among the two colleges, one particular department devoted to the promotion of multiculturalism was chosen because of its relevance to language learning/teaching and the researcher's accessibility.

Within this department, ten students were recruited based on their English proficiency levels. Tables 1 and 2 show student participants' information.

**Table 1 Student Participants' Information (Freshman & Sophomore)**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Length of Learning English</b>	<b>English Proficiency<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>Freshman</b>			
<b>A</b>	Female	6 or 7 years	Interviewee was unwilling to give the score 13 full marks
<b>B</b>	Female	5 years	
<b>C</b>	Female	10 years	
<b>Sophomore</b>			
<b>D</b>	Male	6 or 7 years	37 (TOEFL)
<b>E</b>	Female	Over 10 years	5 (IELTS)
<b>F</b>	Female	10 years	40~50(TOEFL)

**Table 2 Student Participants' Information (Junior & Senior)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Length of Learning English</b>	<b>English Proficiency</b>	<b>Junior Abroad</b>
<b>Junior</b>				
<b>G</b>	Female	Over 12 years	IELTS 6.0	Czech Republic Formal Courses
<b>H</b>	Female	About 8 years	IELTS 6.5	Australia Formal Courses
<b>Senior</b>				
<b>I</b>	Female	About 10 years	TOEFL 81	Boston, U.S.A. Formal Courses
<b>J</b>	Female	About 13 years	TOEFL 53	Washington, U.S.A. Languages Courses Only

<sup>1</sup> TOEFL scores, Test scores from College Admission

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected mainly from two sources: (a) documents and (b) semi-structured individual interviews with student participants. After recruiting the participants, an approximately 2-hour semi-structured interview was held with each participant from December 2008 to February 2009. All interviews were conducted in person, except that those juniors who had gone abroad were interviewed using Skype.

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, I used Carspecken's (1996) reconstructive analysis to reconstruct the data by articulating the implicit cultural themes that are usually not discursively aware of on the part of the participants. Then, I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method for coding. I coded the data on the basis of the themes emerging from the discourse and then compared the codes with the previous literature.

### **Students' Voices**

#### ***Improvement in English***

The results showed that all the interviewees perceived that different aspects of their English were improved due to English-only instruction. As "J" said, "Our English is surely better than others" (J, 9130). In particular, the freshman and sophomore interviewees thought that the intensive English-taught courses generated a large amount of English input, increasing their listening abilities. As "E" expressed, "Ya! Because of this (teaching in English), I think my English listening was improved" (E, 6703). Also, two students specified their vocabulary repertoire expanded.

In addition, the students articulated that English-only instruction increased their confidence and/or interests in English learning. For instance, "D" expressed gaining confidence about communicating in English via intensive teaching in English. A female freshman interviewee, "A," felt her change from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation to learning English. She also claimed that after learning content in English, she no longer felt scared or worried about English as she had been in high school.

Note that only one interviewee ("I") specified that she cared more about the change (maturity) of her thoughts, rather than her English after she learned in this university.

### *Necessity of English-Only Instruction for Junior Abroad Program*

The interviewees also felt it necessary to have English-taught classes as a preparation step for the Junior Year Abroad Program. Thus, they felt appreciative toward teachers' insistence in using English rather than Chinese while learning in Taiwan. Specifically, they valued the opportunities to learn how to make an oral presentation and write a report in English. Compared with their peers who tended to take exams instead of making reports in the other college of the campus, they felt more confident and accomplished about their own English, as if "a collective pride" emerged from their hearts. As "G" expressed,

Our department encouraged us to express or present in English. When we made a presentation, we needed to use English. Using English compelled me to become more confident. Those students who were in the other college of the campus were sacred of making an oral presentation in English. Seriously!... because they didn't make an oral presentation until their sophomore years. They tended to take exams. But we started to present in English from the freshman year. That's different. (G, 9010; See also 5540)

In particular, the juniors and seniors became more reflective and appreciative about their previous learning in Taiwan. After going abroad, they started to make sense of what was once deemed unnecessary (whole English or heavy workload) or incomprehensible (course content). For instance, "G" thought that it was not until she took courses abroad did she realize that what her teacher taught was commonly and widely discussed in Europe. They cherished having received the explicit instruction of the English academic norms (e.g., how to write an essay in English and an open attitude to the world), which became helpful when they learned abroad.

### *Time for Adjustment*

When it comes to their understanding of the class content, most interviewees observed that they required time to become adjusted to the English-taught courses, including teacher accents, heavy workload, and teacher expectations or new academic norms. A few student interviewees expressed difficulty understanding the classes because of their teachers' accents. Yet most of them seemed to feel more comfortable after some adjustment, while "C" expected and wished to have native-speaking instructors or teachers with better or accurate English pronunciation.

Moreover, the English-taught courses accompanied a new cultural norm for students to learn when they were new to colleges. In high schools, they had tended to focus on reading, writing or memorization for exams, rather than listening to or expressing ideas in English; they played a passive role of a language learner. Yet they were expected to adopt an active or proactive attitude to learning professional knowledge via English in college. They needed to make sense of teacher lectures, how and when to respond to teachers, as well as formulae and ethic codes of English writing and speaking (or plagiarism). Underlying, the students struggled to adopt new learner identities as active, interactive, confident, and independent thinkers.

#### ***Worries about Loss of Professional Knowledge***

Except that one student (“A”) perceived no difference between learning subject matter via English or Chinese, many students perceived that English-only instruction did not impact their professional acquisition in a positive way because of their concerns over content density and depth. As “F” said, “teaching in English more or less impacted the extent to which we could absorb [understand] [the materials]” (F, 6900). A few students expressed that the extent to which teachers could convey ideas via English was reduced because teachers talked or taught slowly. As “H” said, “teacher’s teaching pace would be impacted” (H, 8300). Moreover, teachers would need to rephrase or use alternatives to explain the same concept in order to better student understanding, giving rise to the lack of depth of professional knowledge. Thus, a few students felt so discouraged that they wished their teachers could have taught in Chinese.

Note that the students would not attribute the effectiveness of their learning to simply the instruction medium of English.

#### ***Factors Impacting Learning Subject Matter via English***

According to the student interviewees, I also found factors that might impact students’ learning of subject matter via English: students’ proficiency levels, learning environments, student interests, and teachers’ expressiveness and clarity.

#### ***Students’ Proficiency Levels***

Many participants felt it necessary to recruit students with high English proficiency levels in the future; otherwise, students might “suffer” from learning via English. “Once they [my classmates] missed it, they simply sat there and thought nothing” (B, 1). Plus, the students with lower proficiency levels might take language classes rather than formal classes during their Junior Abroad Year, which



according to “H” was a disservice for students. Thus, many students felt it inevitable to recruit students with higher proficiency levels.

### *Learning Environments*

Moreover, not only student proficiency levels but also an accepting learning environment was imperative for learning in English. Those who were or had gone abroad expressed that their English improved because of English-taught classes both abroad and in Taiwan. But when they came back to Taiwan, their English deteriorated because of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment. As “J” said, “It’s become not many opportunities to listen to or speak English. It’s different from the authentic situation [the authentic use of English]. I started to think in Chinese after coming back” (J, 8800). Also, they felt that “the class atmosphere” in Taiwan was “weird” enough to discourage them to express themselves in English in class. The student, “J,” named it as “peer pressure” or “pressure from worries about how peers perceived them,” regardless of how good or poor they perceived their English abilities to be. That is, the students felt that the so-called whole English environment in Taiwan was not totally the same as it was abroad.

### *Student Interests*

It seems that when students took an interest in a particular subject, they became more intrinsically motivated to learn it via English. The students would feel that they learned a lot, “if they did not fall asleep in class,” “if they concentrated,” or “if they felt interested in the subject matter.” In this case, the instruction via a foreign language did not become a hindrance for them.

### *Teachers’ Expressivity or Clarity*

From the student interviews, I also found that whoever was referred to as a good teacher had the same quality: their English was viewed as excellent (and clear) by students, and their teaching serious but humorous and inspiring in the sense that teachers would rephrase in a simpler way or use different concrete examples to promote student understanding. Thus, teachers’ ability to explain or rephrase teaching materials was deemed necessary.

## **DISCUSSION**

The preliminary analysis of student interviewees showed that students perceived that English-only instruction had both positive and negative impacts on

their learning. On the positive side, students cited their improvement in English, particularly in terms of listening and vocabulary, as well as confidence and interests in English, which might be attributed to the large amount of English inputs in the English-only class environment. If language is viewed as a life style (culture), then these students seem gradually acculturated into this English academic environment by understanding and/or adopting an active role of learners, as well as the unwritten formulaic and ethic codes of academia.

Their improvement in English climaxed in students' Junior Abroad Year, since students felt they were immersed in a whole authentic English environment, which might also be due to the larger amount of English inputs. Even if their peers were also non-native-speakers of English, they were compelled to express themselves in English for mutual communication and interpersonal relationships. This Junior Abroad Year experience in turn requires English-taught courses in Taiwan as preparation steps. In particular, students cherished those classes that cultivated their independent thinking, encouraged open attitudes towards learning and the world, and taught the script of socio-cultural, academic codes, as if a "bridge" linked two states of learning across the Pacific ocean.

On the negative side, this preliminary analysis showed that many students speculated or worried about a loss in professional acquisition because of the foreign medium of instruction. They encountered difficulties, such as teacher accents, heavy workload, ambiguity, and peer pressure. Like Vinke et al (1998), the results indicated the importance of teachers' ability to explain or rephrase teaching materials (clarity and expressiveness). Thus, teachers could rephrase the same concept using simpler words or sentence structures, concrete and familiar examples, question-answer adjacency pairs, metaphors or analogies, and/or other teaching techniques (e.g., audio-visual supports, guest speakers, etc.). In addition to teacher accountability, students also deemed it necessary to recruit those with high English proficiency levels from the very beginning.

Unlike Vinke et al (1998), this paper found that teachers should also attend to affective factors, including fragile language egos and intrinsic motivation. That is, students' fear of losing face or of peer pressure might prevent them from risk-taking and thus dare not speak English in class, rendering to less output/speaking time. Also, whether or not they are interested in one kind of subject matter might directly impact their investment in it, sidestepping the negative effects of a foreign instruction medium. Last but not least, teachers should also understand that students required some adjustment to acculturate into a new learning environment. Therefore, providing an accepting environment and explicit instruction of the unwritten codes was imperative.

Although the tentative results showcase the reality of English-only instruction from students' perspectives, I found that students had difficulty depicting what actually happened in their classes. In order to better understand how to facilitate teacher instruction and student learning, future researchers could adopt observation or reflective focus group discussion to collect more data. It is also important to investigate if there is congruence between teacher and student perceptions by collecting teacher interviews or observation. Moreover, a longitudinal study on a particular student group could also be conducted to examine students' perceptions of or the effectiveness of English-only instruction.

### CONCLUSION

This paper reports the student voices regarding English-only instruction in a private and comprehensive university in Taiwan with an aim to understanding the reality of English-taught courses. Unlike the previous literature with a particular focus on teachers, this study reveals complicated factors contributing to the learning effectiveness, calling more qualitative research in the future. The tentative result reflects organizational or curricular factor: students deem it necessary to have English-only instruction in Taiwan, paving the way for their Junior Abroad Year. It is likely that these students were more motivated (or compelled) to learn English than those who did not plan to go abroad. Moreover, congruent with Xiao's (2006) warning of the negative impact of overemphasizing internationalizing higher education, this paper gives us a clearer picture of how both positive and negative learning effects are intertwined in a complicated sense. Although English has been improved, particularly in terms of listening, vocabulary and confidence in English, students worried about a loss in their acquisition of professional knowledge. In addition to teachers' clarity and expressiveness, students' affective factors (language egos and peer pressure), intrinsic motivation, proficiency levels and time for adjustment also account for (students' perceptions of) learning effectiveness. Although the paper is based on an ongoing research project and thus the results are as yet inconclusive, the complicated factors emerging from student data, I believe, function as a preliminary step for an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of English-only instruction and so internationalizing higher education in Taiwan in the future.

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