

Rethinking English-only Instruction for Taiwan's EFL College Students from the Critical Literacy Perspective

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Abstract

Recently educators and administrators of Taiwan's universities have advocated for English-only instruction in response to the current educational climate of internationalizing higher education. However, the practices of English-only instruction simply fit well with the concern of political correctness and comply with an externally imposed policy. This English-only instructional policy inextricably contradicts with the principles of English language learning and teaching. Taking a stance of critical literacy, I address the social, cultural, and pedagogical issues underlying the English-only instruction. In this article, drawing on sociocultural constructivism, I first contend that English-only

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instruction is unproductive in the EFL context. According to the constructivist theory, learning needs social mediation (Vygotsky, 1987); hence, the best mediational tool of learning is student's mother tongue. I then investigate the inappropriateness of English-only teaching and its ideological biases by exploring Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossic nature of language. The English-only policy unconsciously diminishes the importance of EFL students' native language and correspondingly subjugates these learners. Besides, with the report of National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006), the evidence of English language teaching studies clearly demonstrates that bilingual instruction is more effective than English monolingual instruction. Finally, I suggest a more radical reform in college curricula except for futile alteration in the instructional language.

Keywords: English-only instruction, sociocultural constructivism, heteroglossia, English language learning strategies

Recently a whirling wind of English-only instruction has gigantically swept across college campus in Taiwan because of the current educational climate of internationalizing higher education. This education agenda of “cosmopolitanism” (Appiah, 2006) undoubtedly matches well with the core values of “marketplace reforms” which emphasize sameness and standardization (Gutiérrez, 2008). It also serves as a “policy narrative” which renders English-only instruction as imperative and essential to strengthening Taiwan’s global competitiveness through internationalizing its college education. As Clark, Blackburn, and Newell (2010) pointed out, instructional concentration on “standardization, accountability, and competitive performativity” are actually not a “given,” but humanly fabricated by neo-liberal ideologies. Auerbach (1993) critically revealed “the mechanisms of ideological control” exercised through the policy of English-only instruction and concluded that English-only instruction is not a simple matter of instructional language choice, but an intricate question of ideology. The practices of English-only instruction merely fit well with the concern of political correctness and comply with an externally imposed policy.

This one-size-fits-all English-only instruction inextricably contradicts with the evidence-based principles of English language learning and teaching. Taking a stance of critical literacy¹ (Darder, 1991; Freire,

¹ Soares and Wood (2010) defined the term critical literacy as an instructional approach that “focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students’ lives” (p. 487). Specifically, Grant, Wong, and Osterling’s (2007) regarded critical literacy as “a complex set of social relations, ideologies, attitudes, and practices whereby people struggle around relations of meaning and relations of power” (p. 600).

1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987), I address the social, cultural, and pedagogical issues underlying the English-only instruction. Critical literacy enables me to question the status quo and clarify the complicit relations between language, ideology, and education. From the perspective of critical literacy, this essay attempts to provide theoretical and instructional reflections upon this English-only policy. I undertake to analyze and articulate how cultural hegemony operates, underpins, and legitimizes the English-only instruction. Through English-only instruction do the dominant ideologies reproduce, consolidate, and permeate among the whole society.

In this article, I first draw on sociocultural constructivism to expose educational fallacies underlying the policy of English-only instruction.² I then argue for the inappropriateness of English-only teaching by exploring Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossic nature of language. I also address how the privileging of English-only instruction conflicts with English language learning strategies. Finally, I suggest a more radical reform in college curricula except for futile alteration in the instructional language. Educational reforms should be considered from a broader perspective. In order to raise the quality of Taiwan's college education to the next level, educational standardization and internalization are in great need of reconceptualization and new definition.

² For a detailed discussion of English-only instruction in the ESL context, see Auerbach's (1993) study which traced the US English-only movement and presented abundant evidence against English-only instruction in the ESL classroom.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Since the 1950s sociocultural constructivism has emerged as a vital approach to educational research, placing great emphasis on the influence of social realities and communal collaboration on individual's learning.³ In particular, Vygotsky (1978) postulated theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD)⁴ which sheds light on the social nature of human learning. Aljaafresh and Lantolf (1994) further extended the concept of ZPD as “the framework, par excellence, which brings all of the pieces of the language setting- the teacher, the learner, their social and cultural history, their goals and motives, as well as the resources available to them, including those that are dialogically constructed together” (p. 468). Viewed in this way, student learning and development demand social mediation. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed the idea of situated learning. In essence, human learning can prolifically happen under the condition of communal practices.

³ The sociocultural method of education research is best illuminated in Bruner's (1996) remark: “Culture shapes the mind....it provides with the toolkit which we construct not only our worlds, but our very conception of ourselves and power” (p. x).

⁴ The concept of ZPD is generally viewed as the groundbreaking cornerstone of sociocultural constructivist theories in the field of education research. Vygotsky (1978) defined zone of proximal development as ‘the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined through interdependent problem solving and [his or her] potential development [level] as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or a collaboration with more capable peers’ (p. 86).

The point to be emphasized here is that literacy learning can be better achieved through social mediation (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Among various forms of social mediation is one's mother tongue. Indeed the mother tongue can be employed as an effective learning tool to acquire L2 literacy and content area knowledge. In this regard, English-only instruction for EFL students is not a smart choice of pedagogy. For EFL students, English is not a productive medium of instruction. In addition, the native language stores numerous "funds of knowledge," (Moll & Diaz, 1986; Moll & Greenberg, 1990) from which students can retrieve the acquired ideas, concepts, and reasoning methods to learn new skills. It is a waste of abandoning such a useful learning treasure if classroom teaching is conducted exclusively in English.

Another problematic aspect of English-only policy is the willful negligence of the fact that literacy per se is social in nature (Street, 1984). Literacy can not be isolated and segmented from its social, historical, and cultural context. Lee and Smagorinsky (2000) pointed out the erroneous belief that literacy is basically an autonomous, cognitive skill. Conventionally, literacy is misguidedly conceived as a set of mechanical skills, as Larson (1997) remarked, the "dominant literacy paradigm relies almost exclusively on traditional definition of literacy as a reified set of basic skills devoid of social context or political implications" (p. 439). The proponents of English-only instruction falsely think of L2 literacy as asocial, acultural, apolitical, autonomous, and universalistic. On the contrary, language proficiency is profoundly situated in social and cultural context. Literacy is both part and parcel

of discursive practices in daily lives. The nature of literacy is ideological. For this reason, literacy can serve as “identity kits” (Grant, Wong, & Osterling, 2007).⁵ Language performance reflects its user’s sense of communal belonging, social status, and cultural values, and power relationships (Gee, 2006). From this sociocultural perspective, the implementation of English-only instruction necessarily compels the EFL students to restrain their native language and subordinate themselves to another language. In other words, the English language will subjugate its learners rather than the English language learners command the target language (Street, 1995).

Moreover, from the viewpoint of multiculturalism, an instructional approach should be bilingual, not solely monolingual. The monolingual teaching definitely leads to learning inequality. An unequal education institution is not beneficial to all students. Most of the EFL students will be unable to surmount the learning threshold because of their inadequate English competence. Thanks to this language barrier, both culturally-disadvantaged and lower-achieving students will be unable to accomplish academic goals at school. In a word, English-only instruction customarily denies these students and disgracefully disservices them. Students with limited English proficiency will unquestionably become the victims of English-only instructional policy.

⁵ According to Alvermann (2008), the recognition of the ideological nature of literacy can lead to a better understanding of “an array of social and cultural ways that knowing that can account for seemingly absent but always present power structures” (p. 16). For the detailed discussion about autonomous versus ideological models of literacy, see Grant, Wong, and Osterling’s (2007) review.

HETEROGLOSSIC NATURE OF LANGUAGE

According to Bakhtin (1981), a language is dialogic in nature. The language possesses both centripetal and centrifugal linguistic forces. The centripetal linguistic force dominates and centralizes politics, culture, and ideology; however, the centrifugal linguistic force generates the unofficial diverse dialects. This discursive rivalry leads to a heteroglossia. Because of its heteroglossic nature, language plays an essential role in “positioning the speakers and their texts within the heterogeneity of social positions and worldviews that operate in any culture” (Grant, Wong, & Osterling, 2007, p. 600). In this regard, literacy is decidedly ideological not neutral. Literacy practices are compactly entangled within the network of power (Street, 1995).

Given the EFL educational setting, such a heteroglossic competition (i.e., opposition between centripetal and centrifugal linguistic forces) undoubtedly accompanies the classroom practice of English-only instruction. The first and second languages never coexist peacefully.⁶ If English language is acknowledged as the official language of instruction, then EFL students’ native language is

⁶ With regard to the phenomenon of linguistic conflict, Gramsci (1971) pointed out the fact: “Each time that in one way or another, the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge...the reorganization of cultural hegemony” (p. 6).

seemingly degraded as an unofficial, subordinate dialect. Students' L1 and L2 languages incessantly compete beneath the current. This cross-linguistic rivalry will result in an excruciating consequence that EFL students' mother tongue becomes subordinated to the English language. In the English-only teaching context, English becomes an official, mainstream, and academic discourse which seems superior to the native language. Consequently, EFL students' mind is unconsciously colonized. The ghost of colonialism appears again and even justifies itself in the name of pedagogy.

The domination of English language is the scum of colonial exploitation. Subjecting to this mainstream language might cause the crisis of linguistic genocide and home language loss (Lin & Luke, 2006; Pennycook, 1998; Ramanathan, 2002). In most situations English-only instruction indisputably reinforces and reproduces Western cultural, political, and academic hegemony (Edelsky, 2006). The privileging of English-only instruction harshly traumatizes EFL students' mother tongue. Without positive ascertainment of their native language, EFL students are exposed to self-esteem and identity crises. Hence these students' sense of ethnic pride and identification might be suppressed. In addition, with dilapidation of the native language, it is difficult to construct, solidify, and even inherit nationally shared values and beliefs. Such college education with adherence to English-only instruction is of little value in sustaining Taiwan's national identity and safeguarding its cultural heritage.

The policy of English-only instruction also deprives EFL students

of language rights (e.g., Kymlicka, 1995), ignores individual student's learning difference, and coerces students to use English to read, write, think, and learn. English-only instruction usually assumes an a priori belief in the "technocratic meritocracy paradigm," (Grant, Wong, & Osterling, 2007) which regards literacy as cognitive techniques possessed by the elite. This English-only policy does not take into account notable differences in students' English proficiency. Practicing English-only instruction will enlarge the gap of learning accomplishment between the lower-achieving and high-level students. Students with limited English proficiency (LEP) will be unfairly labeled as "unprepared," "struggling," and "underachieving" learners. They will not receive adequate instructional treatment merely because of their unsatisfactory English ability. Consequently, the dropout rate of college will increase. In this way, college education will only serve few English proficient students and so does perpetuate social class. English-only instruction indeed constitutes a learning barrier imposed on the majority of EFL students. Instruction in English might result in more struggling readers and at-risk students. The policy of English-only instruction severely violates the principle of "equitable access" to education (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009). The LEP students will be completely excluded from higher education. Even the average students will study hard to barely survive the English-only instruction. To conclude, English-only instruction is not simply a matter of pedagogical choice, but a controversial policy which jeopardizes learning equity and social justice. In a progressive system of higher education, literacy is not supposed to be conceived as the exclusive

privilege of the elite, but should be people's basic competence. In a democratic society, students should be granted the right to choose any language as their reading, writing and learning instrument.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

The rationale used to justify English-only instruction is principally framed on the conventional wisdom that “use of the L1 will impede progress in the acquisition of English” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 2). The deepest rationality behind English-only instruction is grounded upon the immersion model of language learning (Cohen & Swain, 1976; Collier, 1989; see also Holobow, Genesee, Lambert, Gastright, & Met, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1991). This ESL immersion model assumes that “the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it and begin to think in English” (Auerbach, p. 4). However, such assumptions are simply unexamined and taken for granted. Indeed, English-only instruction is not effusively supported by the accumulated body of English language teaching research (Cummins, 1981; Garcia, 1991; Irujo, 1991; Phillipson, 1992; Snow, 1990). It is sufficient to say that English-only instruction is not theoretically and pedagogically sound.

According to English language teaching research, English-only instruction actually is not beneficial to EFL students. National Literacy Panel (NLP) reviewed a large body of empirical studies on ESL instruction and reached the conclusion that bilingual instruction excels

the monolingual, English-only one. In the executive summary of NLP report, August and Shanahan (2006) asserted:

Studies that compare bilingual instruction with English-only instruction demonstrate that language-minority students instructed in their narrative language as well as in English perform better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than language-minority students instructed only in English. (p. 5)

Classroom instruction in both English and native language is substantially helpful to EFL students. Moreover, second language acquisition (SLA) theories disfavor English-only instruction. Cummins (1981) postulated the interdependence hypothesis that L1 and L2 acquisition developmentally depend upon each other. In this regard, this mutual development of first and second languages again rejects the efficacy of English-only instruction. Cummins (2000) advocated for bilingual instruction and stated that “academic proficiency transfers across languages so that students who have developed literacy in their first language will tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in their second language” (p. 173). To sum up the argument thus far, discarding EFL student’s mother tongue to embrace English-only instruction is not a judicious decision of pedagogy.

Bilingual teaching can empower EFL students in academic performance (Cummins, 1986). English-only instruction is simply

subtractive, not additive to these EFL students' academic development.⁷ English-only teaching might weaken, not strengthen student's intellectual capabilities. For EFL students to employ their native language is much easier than to use English to think about the text, engage themselves in the text, and construct meaning from the text. Devoid of their native language, it is difficult for EFL students to assert and exercise their agency over reading, writing, and learning.⁸ Having a deficient sense of agency is a great disadvantage to these students. For this reason, college instruction should be conducted in student's native tongue and English is adopted as an additional language to assist them in studying (Wong-Fillmore, 2000). What I particularly wish to emphasize is that bilingual instruction can contribute to student's linguistic and cognitive growth.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF IMPROVING COLLEGE EDUCATION: THINK GLOBALLY AND ACT LOCALLY

The mission of internationalizing Taiwan's college education is

⁷ Grant, Wong, and Osterling (2007) summarized four essential frameworks for Cummins's (1986) empowerment: " (1) an additive, not a subtractive, approach to the home language and culture; (2) an interactive, not a transmission model of pedagogy; (3) incorporating, not excluding, the families and communities; and (4) assessment that is advocacy oriented, not gatekeeping" (p. 606).

⁸ Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) theorized agency as an individual student's "generativity, their capacities – embedded always in collective meaning and social relations – to imagine and create new ways of being" (p. 5).

splendid. I applaud the foresight of recognizing the need of raising the quality of instruction to the world-class standard. And I also acknowledge the painstaking efforts of conducting an English-only instruction in the EFL context. However, this dignified agenda of innovating college education is unlikely to be accomplished only through English-only instruction. In this article I present a critique of deficit foundations of English-only instruction. I review the policy of English-only instruction using a diverse set of theoretical lenses that take into account social and cultural dimensions of literacy, heteroglossic nature of language, and English learning strategies. Generally, studies on English language teaching do not recommend the straight application of English-only instruction to the EFL setting. Research evidence unmistakably indicates that English-only instruction is not so effective in improving student's English language proficiency and their academic performance. It is not beneficial for EFL students if English becomes the only mediational tool for learning and thinking. Actually, EFL students' mother tongue can be utilized as a more powerful medium for comprehending the English text.

In order to elevate Taiwan's college education to the world level, English-only instruction might be the least necessary action taken. English-only instruction does not advance the interests of EFL students. To make matters worse, it undermines an equal and democratic educational system. The implementation of English-only instruction might constrain and even suppress Taiwanese students' academic literacy. Expedient reform in the instructional language is not only superficial,

but also ineffectual. Any efforts to homogenize the instructional language will be in vain.

To sum up, college education should not be playfully tossed about on a whimsical wave of pedagogical, ideological, and political change. In my opinion, the royal road to heighten the quality of college education is to revolutionize the entire college curriculum. The first and foremost step is to think globally and then act locally. Taiwan's college education needs to step with the world through rethinking and revitalizing local cultures and institutions.

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