

Teaching English in Taiwan: Social, Cultural and Economic Implications

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Introduction

A couple years ago I returned to Memorial University, from Taiwan, to prepare myself for teaching in the Western World. I, like many young University graduates from the English-speaking world embarked on the adventure of teaching English as a second language in a foreign country. A teacher's motivation for taking on such an endeavor may vary considerably from person to person. A commonality, however, rests in how English teachers are viewed within the larger society in which they teach. Once teachers signs their first contracts, they become connected to the society where they teach culturally, economically, and politically while taking on the responsibility of becoming a purveyor merchant of cultural capital. The ability to speak English translates into economic success in the minds of many non-English speaking people. In my experience, however, I perceived a sense of resentment towards the overwhelming demand for English Instruction. This resentment was rooted in a country's cultural values which were seen as being threatened by the English initiative.

This paper will explore my journey in teacher preparation from Newfoundland to Taiwan and back to Newfoundland. Using my experience, teaching in Taiwan from 2007 to 2010, I will suggest the symbolic nature of the institution of English language instruction and the cultural and social importance placed on the teaching profession.

First Impressions of Taiwan

In my third week of teaching English as a second language to children in Taiwan, I was told that after recess, I would need to go to a small room on the top floor of the kindergarten where I was teaching and stay there (with the other English teachers) until someone came to collect us. When I inquired as to the reason for this bizarre request, I was told that the 'government' was coming to the kindergarten for an inspection and we English teachers had to be out of sight. Taiwan had passed a law that prohibited English instruction to kindergarten students based on the belief that children of that age needed to focus on Chinese study before starting to learn a foreign language.

As I sat on the floor of this small, dark room with the other ESL teachers, we whispered to each other about the absurdity of the situation. We were all legally employed teachers who taught at other schools later in the day. We found it strange that the school would receive warning of an impending inspection. Stranger than that was the fact that the school had a huge banner on the side, advertising English instruction (in English and Chinese) with a picture of a foreign teacher holding hands with Taiwanese children. It was obvious to us teachers that there must have been a blind eye turned to us and that these inspectors were probably paid off or just going through the motions as delegated by the department of Education.

I taught in southern Taiwan in a city of 1.5 million people. My wife and I left Newfoundland with nothing more than a visitor's visa and the name and number of our recruiter. Within two

days of our arrival in Taiwan, we had jobs, scooters, an apartment, and cell phones. It was immediately clear to me that there were many classrooms all around the island filled with students and not enough teachers to instruct them. Our recruiter often asked me if I had any friends back home that would be interested in coming to Taiwan. There was a sense of desperation in the English teaching community where the supply of teachers was not reaching the demand for instruction. Many English-speaking travellers without proper credentials were even hired as substitutes. These teachers would come to Taiwan on visitor visas and take day trips to Hong Kong every two months so that they could legally re-enter Taiwan.

The foreign population numbered around fifteen thousand, most of whom were English teachers. The area of town where I resided was even nicknamed “Little Canada” as so many of us teachers lived there. In the schools, we were treated almost like celebrities. We had little responsibility relative to Chinese staff and our services could not possibly meet the overwhelming demand. The students came from affluent families who could afford the inflated tuition costs which helped to pay our salaries.

Taiwan is very unique in terms of its political structure. Many people whom I spoke with resented the island’s affiliation with Mainland China and admired the capitalistic style of democracy epitomized by the west. The English language seemed to symbolize this lifestyle for the Taiwanese. Though English was not widely spoken, it was written on billboards, t-shirts, and advertisements throughout the city.

English Language as a Significant Symbol

I will examine the notion of symbolic interactionism in relation to the English language as a significant symbol in Taiwanese society. According to Robson (2013), *Symbolic Interaction Theory* states that individuals construct the meaning of symbols through social interactions with emphasis on language and the idea of the self. By this definition, we define things in our world based on our experience and interactions with others. According to Blumer, (cited in Robson, 31) people generate *significant symbols* (e.g., the institutions of learning English and myself as an English teacher) through the use of language which creates a deep web of meaning for these symbols.

The fact that I can speak and teach English is of little consequence in Canada. There are many other people like me and there is very little demand for ESL teachers. However, the situation in Taiwan is quite the opposite, where English seems to be connected to money. Advertisements in Taiwanese newspapers and billboards almost always include an English phrase, regardless of the likelihood of Taiwanese people being able to read or understand it. If the message is not in the phrase itself, then what is the meaning associated with such advertisements? According to many copywriters in Taiwan, the use of English in advertisements is aimed at creating a certain atmosphere. Therefore, these advertisements are meant to evoke “the desired effects and socio-psychological impacts” (Hsu, 223). If the use of English, in advertisements, translates to heightened consumerism, then English must symbolize something of great social importance to the Taiwanese people.

The young students that I taught did not have an innate appreciation for the English language. What they knew about the importance of learning English was taught to them by the older generation. Globalization has come to dictate the economic world through the English language and learning it will greatly improve the chances of these Chinese-speaking students for future success.

Children see their parents place great importance on learning English and this is interpreted as a process of socialization as values and beliefs are passed down and modified through the generations. The parents of my students held great respect for me as a teacher and showed their appreciation through gifts and gestures on a regular basis. I feel as though I was symbolized as being a tool for their children's future success. Of course, one could make that claim for teachers everywhere, but being an English teacher in Taiwan held special meaning for parents.

So if there is a shared meaning of English as profitable knowledge in Taiwanese society, then why was I made to hide from government officials as they searched the kindergarten in which I worked? Isn't meaning supposed to be adapted by the *generalized other* and shared throughout a society? Critics have pointed out that symbolic interactionism is focused too much on the individual. Upon first reading this claim, I found it puzzling that the theory stated that a society comes to share these meanings. In reference to the Taiwanese views on the English language, there is obviously a group of people who do not share the same meaning of English as the advertisers and parents mentioned previously.

Government policy seems to speak for citizens who view English instruction as a threat to traditional language and culture. Many people of the older generation of Taiwan migrated to the island from Mainland China in the mid-20th century and have held on to traditional Chinese culture. Policies aimed at keeping English instruction out of Taiwanese kindergartens reflect a clash of meaning. When looking at English instruction in Taiwan through the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the bridge between micro and macro effects is not yet fully formed. I believe that life experience plays an important role in meaning making and can cause very opposing views regardless of communication within a given society.

Conclusion

My experience of teaching English as a foreign language in Taiwan was an incredibly rewarding one with fond memories and great friendships made. I would recommend it to anyone looking for adventure and a broadening of the mind. The purpose of this paper, however, is to point out aspects of the English teacher identity that I was unaware of when I ventured overseas. I looked at the job opportunity as a means of travel. I didn't consider that what I was teaching and representing had such far-reaching implications that affected a country's economic, social, and cultural identity.

Although I left Newfoundland to be a teacher, I feel that I have returned home with a worldview that has been heavily influenced by my time spent in Taiwan. Back in Newfoundland, the Faculty of Education and Memorial University is enabling me to further my education and continue to evolve as a teacher, future students and teacher colleagues will contribute to this evolution. In a time when globalization is in full swing, I was able to play a small part in the

future successes of my students in Taiwan as well as gain a new appreciation for the idea of cultural preservation. Once I left the English-speaking world, I found that “English” in a foreign society, was viewed from very diverse perspectives.

References

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