

The Negative Influence of ESL-Methodology on the Acquisition of an L3 in Taiwan

Chris Merkelbach

1. Taiwan and foreign languages - a short description

In order to understand foreign language teaching in contemporary Taiwan, one must know about something about the native languages spoken there. Taiwan's official language is Mandarin; however, the most commonly spoken language is Taiwanese. A Minnan dialect is spoken in parts of the Fujian Province of the Chinese mainland, and when different ethnic groups migrated to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland over the last five hundred years, they brought their distinct language diversity with them. During the fifty years of Japanese occupation, from 1895 to 1945, attendance at elementary schools, taught in Japanese, was possible and recommended by the authorities, and after 1941 was made compulsory for all Taiwanese.

Today, Mandarin is mostly spoken in the northern, urban areas of the island, especially in the capital city of Taipei, whereas Taiwanese is spoken in most other parts of the island. Compulsory education, now extended to nine years, is increasingly delivered in both languages. Hakka and nine other aboriginal languages are spoken in local areas, and a quite well-developed TSL is signed in the deaf community of Taiwan. Mandarin is the language used in high school and university education, although it has been proposed that universities switch from Mandarin to English. Even the Democratic Progressive Party of President Chen Shui-bian, normally in favor of nativisation or Taiwanisation, favors the increased use of English in higher education to help the country better meet the needs of increasing globalization. Premier Yu Shyi-kun recently proposed that English be made the second official language and several hundred foreign teachers be employed to improve language training in public schools.

2. Traditional foreign language classes in Taiwan

Teaching the foreign language in school in addition to the mother tongue has a relatively short history. The earliest records of foreign language classes in a school environment go back to the 1885-1891 period when the provincial governor Liu Ming-chuan founded the so-called "West Class" to train translators and interpreters for English and French. As a supporter of the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1898), he placed great importance on direct contacts between China and the West. The languages were taught by two Westerners and two Chinese teachers who had studied abroad. Other Chinese teachers were responsible for teaching Chinese culture (Lee 1995: 188-191).

There are no remaining records of foreign language classes at National Taiwan University between its founding as the Japanese Taihoku Imperial University in 1928 and its transfer to Republic of China authorities in 1945. I assume, however, there was some instruction in German, and in French, Dutch, English and Turkish, as language teaching textbooks for these languages were recently found when books acquired during the Japanese occupation were catalogued. German was likely taught because of Japan's alliance with Germany. Furthermore, a whole class set of heavily used and annotated German language text books (Bierwirth 1928) was discovered. No assumptions can be made about the other languages as only single texts for these languages were found. The catalogues for the university library were destroyed in 1945 when the Japanese abandoned the university. According to university enrolment records, classes in English, German, French and Japanese were immediately offered in 1949 when the Nationalist government took control of the university. Political and economic factors quickly made English the most important of the foreign languages. A huge market of private and semi-private language schools and cram schools of extremely varying quality quickly emerged to meet this growing demand.

-2-

When a second foreign language became a requirement for university education in the late nineties, tertiary language teaching became a compulsory part of university teaching. As a result, an increasing number of high schools began to offer classes in Japanese and the European languages German, French and Spanish. On May 16, 2002, the *United Daily News* (p. 14) reported that of 7,017 students studying a second foreign language in Taipei 4,584 were studying Japanese in 261 classes, 1,896 were learning French, 303 were enrolled in German, and 234 were studying Spanish. Japanese is the leading tertiary language nationally with 2,002 students in 462 classes, followed by 107 classes in French, 55 classes in German and 18 classes in Spanish. Tertiary languages are slowly gaining ground, but still lag far behind English as the first foreign language.

Other than Japanese hardly any other Asian languages are taught on Taiwan with the exception of Korean which is taught at Chinese Culture University. Other Southeast Asian languages such as Tagalog, Thai or Vietnamese are not taught at all. The reasons for this situation can probably be found in stereotypical Chinese attitudes toward these cultures (viz. Merkelbach 1998: 111-129). English instruction generally begins in junior high school and, more recently, often begins in primary schools from the third level onwards. Numerous private kindergartens use a wide variety of methods when they begin to teach English from the age of three. One should be able to assume that students have quite a large repertoire of language learning strategies when they start to study a tertiary language in high school or university.

3. The Influence of English instruction on tertiary language acquisition (German)

The impact of teaching English as a first foreign language on tertiary language teaching will be analyzed in the following. Hufeisen (1999: 5) comments that students cannot be expected to have a good command of English, nor can a positive transfer of learning experiences be expected since many student experiences while acquiring English are relatively negative. English, however, is taught before German and cannot merely be ignored; it is part of the common knowledge of tertiary language students in Taiwan.

In the following, I will discuss several examples of the negative influence of English on further language instruction in Taiwan. Most of my examples deal with English-German language combinations since the author teaches German, but my European colleagues have repeatedly given me similar examples drawn from other language combinations. English teachers in Taiwan do not only teach English; they influence subsequent attitudes towards the acquisition of tertiary languages. The teaching styles and methods that they pick up can be an important factor in determining the learning strategies they will adopt during the language learning process. These styles and methods influence their motivation in learning another foreign language and determine to a considerable extent the success of their efforts. If first foreign language acquisition is perceived positively, the student is likely to enjoy learning another foreign language.

My examples relate exclusively to the methodological level of first foreign language teaching; no linguistic analysis will be presented. The discussion will center on four areas which constantly create problems in teaching a tertiary language:

- Reading ability
- Reading strategies
- Grammar acquisition
- Learning strategies

3.1 Reading ability

In English classes the teacher writes a word (grapheme) on the blackboard, assigns a sound (phoneme) to the word and gives its meaning. The phonetic equivalent is usually written next to the grapheme. The student then goes home, repeatedly writes the grapheme and repeats the phoneme of the word until the phoneme-grapheme-meaning combination is remembered. Often the phonetic alphabet transcription is also memorized.

This procedure leads the students in almost every class to ask the teacher how every word is pronounced. An illustrative example follows. Two German words - "Gesicht" (face) and "Geschichte" (history) - are regularly pronounced the same way: "**Gescht". Something similar happens with the word "Jugendliche" (youth/young people) which is constantly confused with the word "Junge" (boy), and so it turns into "**Jugendliche." Not only are the single letters not read and not combined into a meaningful unit, but the entire graphemic unit as a whole is recognized, and the student must check his/her memory for the phonetic information needed to pronounce this lexical unit. As a result, similar graphemic units are not recognized as two different words. Students even often record their lessons on tape in order to remember the sound combination of words. That there is a certain predictability for a sound and a relation between it and the grapheme seems not be noticed by the students.

This learning / teaching strategy may be traced back to the earliest mother tongue writing classes when the teacher assigns a sound to a Chinese character and has the student repeat it several times until it is remembered. Since the phoneme equivalent of a Chinese character often seems unpredictable, or even arbitrary, phoneme/grapheme combinations have to be learned one by one. The acquisition of Chinese writing skills is thus quite time-consuming, and the unreflected transfer of this method to English classes consequently makes English learning a much more time-consuming process than is needed. This methodology leads students to avoid repetition and practice at home as they fear their pronunciation might be wrong. An old-fashioned methodology, this learning strategy wastes time that could be better used in more creative

language training, and the student finds it both demoralizing and demotivating.

When the time-consuming technique of repeated reading and pronouncing, of rote memorization, is used in tertiary language class - where the time available for language learning is already severely limited - is both wasteful and unnecessary to spend time to "un-teach" bad old habits and to learn new, more efficient habits.

-4-

3.2 Reading strategies

In tertiary language classes in Taiwan it quickly becomes obvious that reading strategies have not been taught in either the native or the first foreign language acquisition process. Students do not distinguish between global, selective or exact reading strategies. They engage in - for lack of a better term - what I call (following Johnson and Ngor 1996) - "lexical processing" of a text. Take a look at the language school books of any Taiwanese student. Between every line, above every word, a Chinese translation has been written. Every time students encounter a word they do not immediately recognize, they spend a long (and boring) time thumbing through a dictionary, carefully writing down the Chinese translation, and finally trying to combine the Chinese words into a meaningful unit, assuming that this combination does actually convey the meaning of the original foreign text. Getting to understand a foreign language text by this method takes an excessively long time, and makes a global, fast understanding of a text impossible. Even knowing all of the individual words does not ensure understanding because grammatical and syntactical information is generally neglected as merely a constituting part of the meaning. Reading strategies which look for and use already known information on the lexical (cognates etc.) or content (common knowledge) level are not taught; the decoding of the text becomes extremely difficult and, of course, demotivating. As a result, learning a foreign language is often perceived as a kind of punishment. This attitude, along with a low expectation of eventual success, is repeatedly exhibited by beginners in tertiary language classes. If they wish to be successful, tertiary language teachers must un-teach this lexical processing strategy and teach their students to employ a diversity of reading strategies. This is both time-consuming and wasteful as this time could be better used dealing with tertiary language acquisition on a linguistic level.

3.3 Grammar acquisition

Grammar rules - the explicit rules describing the regularities of language - are generally taught in English classes because they are relatively easy to correct on the exams which dominate the Taiwan education system. Rules and their exceptions are learned by heart and can be easily recited for most exams, but few students understand their function. Not only do rules order words in a sentence, but they also convey content. Furthermore, the terminology of the grammatical meta-language frequently causes problems. Students are constantly being confused by, say, the difference between a noun functioning as a subject or an object and a verb functioning as a predicate. The problem can be traced back to Chinese language classes where students are often taught that Chinese has no grammar, and that grammar is something unique to western languages. The Taiwan student's first exposure to grammar is usually the English language class, but he is generally unaware of the linguistic functions of grammar.

Furthermore, the translation into Chinese of Latin-based grammatical meta-language is not standardized, nor are common guidelines for its use given by the Ministry of Education in its English language teaching plans. Consequently, for the tertiary language teacher there is hardly a sound grammatical basis upon which to build grammatical structures in the new foreign language.

3.4 Learning strategies

The Taiwanese education system, like those of Japan, Korea and China, is based upon regular exams. If the student wishes to be promoted, he or she must pass an exam. The exams stress the rote memorization of facts since rote learning as a learning technique allows more facts to be learned in less time, and the facts are ready for instant retrieval. Rote memorization has its short-term advantages but is less successful over the long run. Even in foreign language classes where success is determined over the long run, rote learning is the preferred strategy. Other helpful learning strategies that might speed the acquisition of a tertiary language remain unknown to students.

-5-

4.0 Catalogue of expectations

The above-mentioned issues can be summarized in a catalogue of expectations for a secondary language:

- Western language reading skills should be taught in those languages as an analytical skill, with a clear concentration on grapheme-phoneme relations in those languages.
- English as a first foreign language should teach global, selective, and narrow reading strategies.
- Grammar should not be taught as an end in itself, but as a description of not only word order, but also as the conveyor of content information.
- A standardized grammatical meta-language should be created in Chinese (whether it be translated from a Latin base or invented from scratch) for use in foreign language classrooms.
- A broad range of learning strategies should be taught and employed for foreign language acquisition.

In this author's opinion, the realization of these expectations will enhance the quality of tertiary language teaching in Taiwan, and improve student motivation and speed in learning foreign languages. They should also have a positive influence on the English language acquisition process itself.

5. Concluding remarks

The above critique relates to the methodology of teaching English as a first foreign language in Taiwan. However, these points also apply to the practice of teaching nearly any other foreign language in Taiwan. As a consequence, not only does ESL-methodology have to change, but the methodology of teaching any tertiary language must change as well. The various language teaching methodologies do not only have to incorporate the positive results of first foreign language acquisition, but they also should constantly remind students that - in our case - the European languages do exhibit relationships on a grammatical and lexical level which offer help during L3 acquisition. This has to be made clear to the students. An outstanding example for this constant incorporation of English into the German language acquisition is the Korean book *Ch'oisin Toigiro - Neue deutsche Sprache* (An 1999) which is discussed in detail by Kai Rohs (2001). A continuous comparison between German and the English language on a grammatical and lexical level will help the students understand the parallels and differences between the languages and will consequently improve the learning progress in German.

But a textbook is not the only means to influence the effectiveness and efficiency of language learning: During class time, conscious reflection by the teacher and the students about lexical and grammatical structures is helpful. This might be done by means of different visualisation techniques (mind maps, etc.) or on a meta-cognitive level. Those visualisations would always include English and might even extend to the Chinese mother tongue. Cognates and *faux amis*, for example, would become a constant subject for discussion. When students become aware of the supportive (or distracting) role of their former language acquisition experiences they can transfer (or reject) them successfully when learning a new language. According to Lutjeharms (1999, 8-10), students themselves perceive this language awareness to be very positive.

-6-

But above all else, a foreign language curriculum that includes all foreign languages taught in Taiwan must be developed. This curriculum must extend beyond the current common listing of foreign words and grammar rules. It would include learning strategies, their acquisition and use, different goals and the interrelationships between the foreign languages in order to help students learn more foreign languages faster or/and more easily.

References

- An, Sa Kym. (1999). *Ch'oisin Toigiro - Neue Deutsche Sprache* (6th edition) Seoul: Moon Yea Lim.
- Bierwirth, H.C. (1928). *Elementary Lessons in German with List of Useful Words and Stem Groups*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- He Bowen. (2002). Di er guangfangyu: Bian tiyi yingyu. *Zhongguo shibao* 91 nian 3 yue 31 ri, di 2 ye.
- Hufeisen, B. (1999). Deutsch als zweite Fremdsprache. *Fremdsprache Deutsch* 20 (1), 4-6.
- Johnson, R.K. and Ngor, A. Yau So. (1996). Coping with a Second Language Text: The Development of Lexically-based Reading Strategies. In Watkins, D. and Biggs, J.B. (Eds.). *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences* (pp. 123-140). Hong Kong, Melbourne: CERC, ACER.
- Lee, Hsiung-huei. (1995). *Education in Taiwan during the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1683-1895. A Case study in Cultural*

Colonialism? Michigan: Ann Arbour, UMI.

Lutjeharms, M. (1999). Tertiärsprache und Sprachbewusstheit. *Fremdsprache Deutsch* 20 (1), 7-11.

Merkelbach, Chris. (1998). "Das Ausländerbild bei taiwanischen Kindern und Jugendlichen. Ein Beitrag zur interkulturellen Kommunikation." Berlin: HUB, Inauguraldissertation

Rohs, Kai. (2001). Vom Nutzen der Berücksichtigung der Sprachlernerfahrungen in der ersten Fremdsprache Englisch im "Deutsch als Fremdsprache"-unterricht in Südkorea. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 6 (1). Available on-line at http://www.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/projekt_ejournal/jg-06-1/beitrag/rohs1.htm

Copyright © 2006 *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht*

<p>Merkelbach, Chris. (2006). The Negative Influence of ESL-Methodology on the Acquisition of an L3 in Taiwan. <i>Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht</i> [Online], 11 (1), 6 pp. Abrufbar unter http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/Merkelbach1.htm</p>
--

[Zurück zur [Leitseite](#)]