

## *A Study of Taiwanese Teachers' Perceptions of ELTAs*

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### **Abstract**

Since March 29th, 2021, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched the “U.S.-Taiwan Education Initiative: Center for Bilingual Instruction” in Kaohsiung so as to thoroughly implement the Bilingual 2030 Policy in primary and secondary education. Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages (Wenzao) plays an important role in this long-term program. By recruiting foreign students, both native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English and developing their pedagogical content knowledge, these foreign students will turn into English language teaching assistants (ELTAs hereafter) and be allocated in different schools in Kaohsiung to assist local Taiwanese teachers in teaching English and/or other subjects by using English. The current research study investigates how the Taiwanese teachers perceive the effectiveness of teaching and learning English and/or other content knowledge with ELTAs in elementary/secondary schools. IRB-HS will be taken into account. With informed consent, the teacher interviewees will be aware of the topic of research, the purpose of the study and the use of the research results. All their identities will be untraceable to protect their privacy and rights. It is hoped that the research findings will present how Taiwanese teachers benefit from teaching English and/or other content knowledge with ELTAs and how the ELTAs make good use of their teaching knowledge and skills to help the local teachers and students, which are likely to shed light on the further improvements that Wenzao can make, such as the recruitment and selection of foreign students, the ELTAs training workshops the correspondence between Wenzao and those participating local schools, and the cooperation of ELTAs and local teachers, so on. Pedagogical and administrative suggestions will be made accordingly.

Keywords: ELTA, Co-Teaching Methods, K-12 Education

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## **Introduction of the ELTA Program**

In 2021 K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education has been assigned the task of allocating English Language Teaching Assistants (ELTAs hereafter) in elementary and secondary schools in Kaohsiung City. The purpose of this plan is to expose Taiwanese students to more, varied English inputs and resources by interacting with ELTAs who speak English as the medium of communication. Through exposure to English more frequently, it is hoped that Taiwanese students are likely to produce English outputs naturally, advance their understanding of different cultures and the language, learn English and content knowledge in class, and use English to finish activities, and so on in the daily context. Hence Taiwanese students can actually experience language in real life instead of solely learning textbook knowledge in the classroom. In the long run, this kind of pedagogical intervention may cultivate Taiwanese students' English proficiency and improve their international competitiveness and mobility, which represent the main goals of the Bilingual 2030 Policy.

For the first year of this ELTA program, elementary or secondary schools in Kaohsiung City can apply for one ELTA who can co-teach with the local teacher or assist him/her in teaching English and/or other subjects four hours a week and for 12 weeks at most in one semester. A diverse group of ELTA candidates must have completed an 18-hour training program before they are matched to different schools. In order to prepare these candidates to go through the following selection process and the purpose of screening qualified ELTAs, an 18-hour training program serves to (1) introduce classroom language and management techniques frequently used in the English classroom, (2) acquaint candidates with the most popular teaching approach (i.e. content and language integrated learning) and lesson planning, (3) inspire candidates' imagination and creativity in developing teaching/learning activities, (4) establish the mindset of cooperating with local Taiwanese teachers, and (5) how to teach online effectively. This group of ELTA candidates attend a series of workshops instructed by Fulbright advisors; the topics include classroom language, classroom management, CLIL, teaching activities design, co-teaching and cross-cultural communication, effective online teaching and lesson planning. These workshops range from the teaching approach to teaching skills and techniques. These topics are selected to prepare ELTA candidates for their likely teaching job in local schools. All these topics help ELTA candidates learn how to increase student talk time in the classroom, maintain Taiwanese students' involvement during class, stimulate their learning interest, have them experience the joy of language learning with someone other than their teachers and peers, and so on. Afterwards, the slate of the ELTA candidates will be screened again; their attendance, class participation, teaching experience, motivation for co-teaching in local schools, and so on will be considered and evaluated before they are officially nominated for the Wenzao ELTAs. After these preparation and selection processes have been carried out, these nominees can be allocated to different schools according to their availability of co-teaching hours during the semester and the time slots arranged by the schools. The Wenzao ELTAs will cooperate with either English teachers or subject teachers in those elementary or secondary schools.

There are many benefits of this kind of co-teaching in the classroom. For example, teachers or textbooks are not the only English resources. Students can be exposed to different teaching methods or styles, various activities, and varied classroom practices. All these differences benefit students in accommodating their individual learner needs, learning styles and personalities. Students can gain more support from more skilled others and communicate more frequently with the extra teaching professional in the classroom. In addition, with someone coming from a different cultural background, students are likely to raise their cross-

cultural awareness and communication by learning and using English, which is one of the core competencies emphasized in 108 New Curriculum. Other than that, not only a Taiwanese teacher but a foreign teaching assistant can demonstrate how to use English authentically in real life, present natural interactions and communications between speakers of English, model the target language to be learned, and solve communication problems by using strategies. During the co-teaching process, these Wenzao ELTAs will be encouraged to attend the workshops designed by the advising educational consulting team of Fulbright from October 2021 to January 2022 and onwards.

### **Significance of the Study**

As this is the first year that Wenzao is involved in this ELTA program, it is important to learn how the Taiwanese teachers perceive the Wenzao ELTAs after they have carried out in-school teaching for a period of time in those local schools during the semester. Any to-be-improved procedures will be modified before the same program proceeds in the next academic year for more other elementary and secondary schools to apply for ELTAs. Any successful experience, hopefully, can be mimicked and implemented to benefit more Taiwanese teachers and students in other cities in the future. When none of the other university-level institutions participates, only Wenzao and National Sun Yat-sen University (NSYSU) pioneer this ELTA program and go through every step during the process of recruiting ELTAs, training ELTAs, assigning ELTAs to different local schools and feed backing to the Division of Junior High and Elementary Education at K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education. Whenever unexpected problems occur, they present the best opportunity for the whole ELTA administration team to learn from experience. Hence collection and analysis of these records is a must if this ELTA program may be extended to other areas, including outlying islands, in the near future. To achieve this purpose, the current study plays an essential role in shedding light on the further development and implementation of the ELTA program.

### **Research Method**

The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview study in January 2022 to explore the overall perceptions of the Taiwanese teachers on the Wenzao ELTAs. The advantages of employing interviews include the depth and the comprehensiveness of the qualitative data, which can help Wenzao make contextualized (and even customized) adjustments to the implementation of assigning ELTAs to elementary and secondary schools. On the other hand, as there are 15 schools in different urban and rural areas in Kaohsiung during the 2021 academic year, it is not easy to visit all the local schools, in some of which the Wenzao ELTAs work with more than one teacher and help them teach Taiwanese students in different grades. In addition, it is difficult to interview all the teacher participants, transcribe the interviews and then analyze the data in a short time. At the initial stage of the program, it might be more efficient by focusing on the Taiwanese teachers in charge of assigning work to the Wenzao ELTAs in the local schools to explore their perceptions of the way to teach/learn English with the Wenzao ELTAs and how their students benefit from this program.

Before the interview study began, all the teacher participants' consent was obtained to attend to IRB issues. Only one of the schools rejected to participate in the study. As the Taiwanese teachers are all grown-ups, their consent to participate in this research can be given by themselves. This step was completed by collecting their advance informed consent via email or LINE as well as verbally. It was not until October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 that Wenzao received the

finalized list of the 15 local schools officially announced by K-12 Education Administration, MOE, and informed the schools and the ELTAs of this great news immediately. The Wenzao ELTAs started to teach in early November rather than September as planned initially. Despite the fact that this delay affected the implementation progress, the ELTA program got underway, and the trained ELTAs embarked on their teaching journey from then on. By the end of the first semester in the 2021 academic year, 14 Taiwanese teachers were interviewed online in Chinese for 30 to 55 minutes individually. The interview guide consists of eight guided questions which are listed separately in the next section. The interview data were transcribed in Chinese afterwards; the interview excerpts are translated into English in this paper for the purpose of presenting the data. All the data will be saved in the researcher's laptop with locked access to the documents. The e-files will be deleted three years once the interview study has been completed.

The interview data was analyzed by categorizing the contents according to the interview guide to explore how the Taiwanese teachers perceive their co-teaching with the Wenzao ELTAs. The role of the ELTAs in this program will also be discussed and the results can be used to reflect on the first-year stage of the program carried out in the ELTA Educational Resource Center at Wenzao. Any likely findings may bring about further suggestions on the improvements that K-12 Education Administration, MOE, can make in the second year of the program. Also, this program might probably be implemented in other cities in the future on the basis of the achievements obtained in the current ELTA program in Kaohsiung. Therefore, both of the teachers' positive and negative comments on the Wenzao ELTAs will be presented in the following. Any pedagogical or administrative suggestions will be made based on these in-service Taiwanese teachers' reflections.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

The interview findings were generated based on a thorough review of the interview transcripts and represent commonalities across the different teacher interviewees. These commonalities will be identified by following the interview guide in this section. Any unanticipated responses will also be discussed whenever needed. There are eight questions in the interview guide. The interview data will be presented and discussed as follows.

### ***Question 1***

The first question is '*Why did your school participate in the 110 學年度國民中小學引進部分工時外籍教學助理實施計畫 in the first place?*' Most of the teachers (N=10) said that the school administration, such as the Director of the Academic Office, passed on this ELTA program to them and consulted their opinions on integrating one ELTA in their English class for four hours a week. By participating in the ELTA program, these schools hope that ELTAs can expand their students' horizons, create opportunity for students to use English for the purpose of communication, nurture their motivation for using English authentically in a natural environment, raise their awareness of cross-cultural understanding, give them extra English inputs, trigger their creativity, and so on. Among the other teacher interviewees, one of them mentioned that she voluntarily applied for an ELTA for her homeroom class. She used to be an English teacher at the school and started to adopt a new role and become a homeroom teacher in September, 2021. As she had cooperated with five American teaching assistants, including one Fulbright's English teaching assistant (ETA), she thought she could work with one ELTA to develop her CLIL teaching this time. The above responses were not unexpected. The schools' or the teachers' initial motivation for applying for the ELTAs was

mentioned, which somehow corresponded to the core objectives of the ELTA program. Once the program started to roll around, whether or not it could match the teachers' initial expectations is worth our attention. The second interview question probes into this issue.

### ***Question 2***

In response to the second question, '*What part of this program matched your expectation? What did not?*', the teachers reflected on the process of executing the program. Concluding their feedback, the teacher interviewees mentioned what matched their expectations and what failed to satisfy their needs. First of all, through having an ELTA from overseas in class, most of the teachers said that the students indeed had a hands-on experience of interacting with foreigners in simple English used as the means for communication. This kind of real-life example of using English as a tool instead of a school or exam subject is the best language education. Language is learned to communicate intentions. It is hoped that the students' attention can be shifted to the practicality and the value of learning English. Four of the teacher interviewees emphasized that the existence of an ELTA in class also presented an opportunity for the Taiwanese students to develop a broad-minded attitude toward English and its users. What the ELTAs brought into the classroom was quite authentic to help the students to appreciate exotic cultures, customs or festivals firsthand. In addition, four teacher interviewees observed their students' improvements on their interactions with the ELTAs as time went by. To be more specific, the students' fear of speaking English or interacting with the ELTAs seemed to be alleviated to some extent. This kind of English-using behavior was a good sign to learn English at a young age.

On the other hand, what failed to match some teacher interviewees' expectations accentuated their misunderstanding of the ELTA program. A couple of teacher interviewees mentioned they had expected to see a native speaker of English as the ELTA initially. Though they definitely acknowledged the role of English used as lingua franca, one of these teachers insisted that the first/second graders should have learned English pronunciation with native speakers instead of any foreign students with accent. If this ELTA could not assist her in instructing phonics, it was unnecessary to have such an ELTA in her class, not mention that this ELTA was not a well-trained and experienced foreign teacher. This is actually a very harsh comment on a hardworking ELTA who tried hard and never seemed to satisfy this local teacher's request. However, the other teacher looked at the bright side of having a non-native English-speaking ELTA in her class. She confirmed this ELTA's great contribution to introducing cultural differences to her students as well as his dedication to actively interacting with the students in class; she even wished to continue their cooperation next semester. Another teacher interviewee commented on this kind of misconception. She explained that ELTAs had their respective strengths and limitations. Hence she focused on what could be treasured and made good use of the ELTA's advantages within the limited timings for her students' good. Her feedback can be viewed as a possible solution to prevent the future schools or teachers from stereotyping any ELTAs' nationalities.

### ***Question 3***

The third interview question is '*How did the Wenzao ELTA cooperate with you?*' In terms of planning lessons, one common problem mentioned by most of the teacher interviewees is the inadequate time to prepare for the lessons. If one ELTA works at one school for four hours a week, and if the school wishes to have more students to learn with this ELTA, it is expected that this ELTA remains in the classroom for four hours tops. If time must be spared for both

the ELTA and the local teacher to reflect on what was going on in class and what should be prepared for next week's teaching, fewer hours can be saved for the Taiwanese students. Therefore, for the sake of Taiwanese students, the teachers chose to discuss with the ELTAs on LINE in their free time. This decision might have resulted in some negative consequences. First, the message failed to be delivered explicitly and caused unnecessary misunderstandings. Second, the messages were not read on time to solve immediate problems. Third, it was not easy to explain one's teaching idea thoroughly by using texts in one's second language. Last but not least, sometimes the ELTAs missed the deadline set up and agreed on by both parties. All these consequences can deteriorate the quality of co-teaching practices in the classroom to a certain extent. Honestly, the local teachers, the ELTAs and the students are the victims.

In terms of in-class cooperation, many teacher interviewees mentioned that they and their ELTAs took turns to monitor students' learning in class. That means when the teacher was teaching, the ELTA was monitoring, and vice versa. This kind of cooperation corresponds to one of the six established co-teaching models, one teaching and one assisting. These six co-teaching models are (1) one teaching and one observing, (2) one teaching and one assisting, (3) parallel teaching, (4) station teaching, (5) alternative teaching and (6) team teaching (Hanover Research, 2012). One teaching and one assisting is adopted when one teacher presents the material to the class while another teacher is walking round the classroom to monitor student progress without obstructing the teaching flow. The level of planning required is relatively low compared to other co-teaching models. Many teacher interviewees mentioned they were responsible for teaching and asked the ELTAs to look after those who failed to catch up with the class or concentrate on the lesson. While the ELTAs were doing the activities with the students, the teachers helped check the students' understanding and assisted either the ELTAs or the students as needed.

#### ***Question 4***

*'How did this ELTA interact with your students in class?'* was to explore how the ELTAs led discussions or did activities with the students in class. Some teachers pointed out that the inexperienced ELTAs were not very able to take the primary responsibility of teaching. In other words, they did not perform well in managing the class, simplifying the language when their students looked puzzled, or teaching in a more young-learner-friendly way. Solo teaching might be far above their current teaching competence. Hence they needed the local teachers' guidance to give the students clear instructions, adapt the activities and monitor the students' work. These responses were anticipated after they responded to Question 3.

What went beyond my anticipation was the response regarding interaction outside of class. Six out of the 14 teacher interviewees confirmed their appreciation of the ELTAs' active interaction with the students during the breaks. According to these teachers' observation, their students would like to have small talk with the ELTAs using simple English and some Chinese, greeting the ELTAs on the hallway, and even invited the male ELTAs to play basketball or jump the rope with them. In addition to in-class interaction, this kind of out-of-class contact is likely to build rapport between ELTAs and students and enhance learning outcomes. According to Pingree (2021), such outside-class interactions are far less structured and more diverse, which might form a less anxious relationship between the instructor and the student(s). As one-on-one interactions might not be always allowed during limited classroom time, this interaction can be extended and expanded to maximize the positive influence on students' learning outcomes to a certain extent. One of the teacher interviewees said, "(one foreigner teacher) ... used to say the kids spoke good English. I know he didn't

refer to their English proficiency level but their attitude, being willing to interact with English.” This is the attitude valued in the ELTA program. With their willingness to hang out with ELTAs in or out of class, Taiwanese students are likely to seek out opportunities to talk to foreigners in English and regulate their motivation to enhance their oral fluency and accuracy in the future.

### ***Question 5***

The fifth question is ‘*What might be the best part of having one ELTA in your class?*’ In the interviews, the teacher interviewees gave a number of good comments on the existence of one ELTA in their class, and some corresponded to their expectations of the ELTA program mentioned earlier. Firstly, the ELTAs’ presence created an environment in which the students used English as a vehicle. As the students realized that the ELTAs did not speak Chinese, neither their English teachers nor they could interact with the ELTAs in Chinese. This reality somehow weakened the students’ reliance on their teachers or their first language. Likewise, the students could not expect to hear the ELTAs use the script listed in the textbook after class. By means of this opportunity, they could learn that language can be used spontaneously for the purpose of communication in the real world. This kind of language education is what EFL learners cannot learn from their textbooks in the traditional classroom. Secondly, when the ELTAs were the lead teacher for 10 minutes or so in class, the local teachers bought time to observe their students’ behavior so as to support their learning in a more effective way. Without this assistance, normally the teachers needed to focus on their teaching and classroom management without confirming if everyone was on the right track or on the task. Alternatively, when the local teachers were the lead teacher in class, the ELTAs could walk round the classroom and see if anyone needed their further attention or assistance. According to the teacher interviewees, some ELTAs knew when and how to monitor the students’ progress and responded to their respective questions or problems. On the other hand, some inexperienced ELTAs did not understand the monitor role they were playing and kept walking around.

Thirdly, the ELTAs strengthened the students’ motivation for learning English. One teacher mentioned that her ADHD student initiated small talk and told the ELTA something about swimming once. Since then he shared his stuff with this ELTA from time to time, talked to the ELTA during the break and performed better and better in his vocabulary quiz. Because of this ELTA, the learning atmosphere in the classroom seemed different. According to some teacher interviewees, their students asked if they would see these ELTAs again next semester, which exhibited the students’ great approval of having the ELTAs on campus. Another positive comment is related to the learning of different cultures in the classroom which corresponds to one of the responses discussed earlier. Hence those who had never gone any private language institutes to learn English or had no contact with foreigners at all could take advantage of this chance to expand their worldview. Moreover, these ELTAs came from different home countries and had different learning backgrounds. Some of them integrated their past learning experience into their teaching and in turn enriched the learning content. These are the privileges that Taiwanese teachers do not possess.

### ***Question 6 & 8***

The final three questions are to generate the teacher interviewees’ suggestions which they would like to make on Wenzao, the ELTAs and the ELTA program. The sixth question, ‘*What suggestions would you like to make to Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages?*’

and the eighth question, ‘What kinds of administrative resources do you think that the Bureau of Education, Kaohsiung City Government may provide you with?’, are irrelevant to the topic of the current paper. Hence, the discussion of the two questions will be excluded from this section.

### **Question 7**

‘*What suggestions would you like to make to this specific ELTA?*’ is to generate the teacher interviewees’ comments on their ELTAs as some of the ELTAs continue working with the same Taiwanese teachers in the spring semester of 2021 academic year. The constructive comments are likely to help these ELTAs fine-tune their teaching. The first similarity in most of the teacher interviewees’ responses is their acknowledgement of the ELTAs’ contribution to and involvement in the Taiwanese students’ language use and language learning in class or on campus. In addition, all of the teacher interviewees suggested that the ELTAs receive more teacher training sessions in terms of pedagogical content knowledge, materials preparation, developing worksheets, creative activity design, word choice and so on. This similarity corresponds to their feedback on Question 6. Likewise, the teacher interviewees requested more time to prepare for lessons with their ELTAs in person at the school, which was mentioned somewhere earlier. The teachers opted for more of the ELTAs’ hours spent in the classroom at the expense of discussing with the ELTAs face to face. In order not to occupy classroom time, the teachers and their ELTAs contacted each other online after work. Unfortunately, the quality and quantity of their interactions were not satisfying and affected the ELTAs’ teaching performance in class. Before any ELTAs can work independently, they need to be supervised by experienced Taiwanese teachers. Without constant guidance and communication for the purpose of mutual understanding, ideal cooperation is less likely to take place. Complaints made to the ELTAs about their teaching or classroom management skills seem to be a natural consequence.

### **Suggestions and Conclusion**

The first-year ELTA program will finish in July 31, 2022. From then on three ELTA headquarters (i.e. North Center, Central Center and South Center) and the local governments will go hand in hand to recruit more part-time quality ELTAs to provide a rich and diverse English learning environment for students in Taiwan’s public primary and junior high schools. The ultimate goal of this ELTA program is to offer Taiwanese students the opportunities to improve their English language skills and global awareness in an enriched and immersive environment to supplement the Bilingual 2030 Policy. By carrying out the current study, a couple of constructive suggestions can be made on the execution of the ELTA program according to the research findings presented above. First of all, even though the shortlisted applicants must attend the 18-hour pre-service training sessions before they can be assigned to local schools, most of them still have limited experience of teaching English or being an English language teaching assistant. In the classroom they might not be very able to co-teach with Taiwanese teachers, manage the class, monitor student progress, grade language, provide learner-friendly instructions of interactive activities, assess Taiwanese students’ learning, make immediate adjustments to accommodate Taiwanese students’ needs or teach independently. Likewise, Taiwanese teachers might need to develop their awareness of co-teaching models, how supervise ELTAs, and read the job descriptions of ELTAs carefully in order not to overestimate ETLAs’ teaching competency. Otherwise, Taiwanese teachers might get either disappointed or overwhelmed by having one ELTA in their class. It is suggested that workshops or forums can be held regularly for both parties so as to strike a



balance between teaching and co-teaching. Everyone in the classroom can stay on the same page about what they can do to help Taiwanese students.

Secondly, the flexibility of arranging ELTAs' working hours need to be taken into account too. As the interview findings suggested, the teachers needed more time to discuss how to teach and what to teach with the ELTAs. According to the official website of ELTA Program, "ELTAs are expected to work on an average of 4 hours per week at each school. The exact working hour per week depends on the negotiation between the assigned schools and ELTAs." As long as more ELTAs can be recruited to serve all Taiwanese students in public primary and junior high schools by 2030, teaching hours and discussion time can be managed equally to achieve mutual satisfaction between Taiwanese teachers and their ELTAs. As for ELTAs' job roles, they can be English summer/winter camp leader, thematic lesson teaching assistant, English conversation partner, English competition trainer, club activity leader, and others. ELTAs not only serve as assistants in the classroom but other roles in different forms of activities. Lesson planning and teaching preparation hopefully can be completed in advance.

To sum up, the current interview study has generated insight into the actual execution of the first-year ELTA program from the perspective of the Taiwanese teachers. A better idea of who ELTAs are, what they can do, what they might need, what they shall know, and so on has been developed. With such insight, those who have been or will be involved in the program can be better able to anticipate the pros and cons of recruiting ELTAs and having ELTAs in class. In addition, mutuality has been nurtured during the process of executing the program. Both Taiwanese teachers and ELTAs have their respective needs, and both sets of needs matter. When keeping this awareness in perspective, both parties might be able to convey their own needs in a clearer fashion that increases the likelihood to meeting their expectations. Such mutuality can let anyone involved in the program factor different needs into their decisions to achieve a win-win situation. On top of that, either Taiwanese teachers, the administration team, or ELTAs can regulate emotion and maintain commitment to the job and focus on the task at hand especially when nothing might take place on the right track from the beginning.

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