

Exploring English Education in Taiwan: Perspectives of Foreign English Teachers

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Abstract

In 2018, Taiwan launched its Bilingual 2030 policy with the goal of strengthening national English proficiency and enhancing global competitiveness. To support this initiative, foreign English teachers were recruited across public and private K–12 educational contexts. While these teachers play a central role in the daily implementation of bilingual education, their perspectives remain underrepresented in empirical research. This study draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with eight foreign English teachers who have been working in Taiwan since the policy's introduction. Using a basic qualitative design informed by a phenomenological lens, the study explores how teachers perceive English education practices, institutional structures, and policy implementation, and how their lived experiences align with or diverge from the stated goals of Bilingual 2030. Thematic analysis revealed three recurring areas of tension: systemic gaps in policy and curriculum implementation, superficial hiring practices, and limited institutional support for culturally relevant teaching. Findings suggest that while bilingual reform has expanded English-rich environments, insufficient curricular guidance, inconsistent teacher preparation standards, and limited cross-cultural collaboration hinder meaningful implementation. The paper concludes by discussing implications for language policy design, teacher recruitment, and professional support structures in multilingual education contexts.

Keywords: bilingual education, English language education, Bilingual 2040 Policy, Taiwan language policy, culturally sustaining pedagogy

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Introduction

Throughout Asia, English language fluency continues to play an important role in enhancing a nation's global competitiveness. For Taiwan, the Bilingual 2030 policy is an example of this trend. Beginning in 2018, the policy outlines a vision of bilingualism in Mandarin and English in order to increase Taiwan's economic and cultural connectivity worldwide (National Development Council, 2018). As with many large-scale language policies, the nation's education sector was impacted by the expansion of recruitment for foreign English teachers across K-12 settings (Ministry of Education R.O.C. [Taiwan], 2024). Even with these teachers playing critical roles in helping the Bilingual 2030 policy come to fruition through Taiwanese learners improving their English skills, their voices are rarely highlighted in recent policy evaluations or academic research.

This paper addresses that missing perspective by examining how foreign English teachers in Taiwan perceive English education practices and institutional structures during their time teaching under the Bilingual 2030 initiative. These teachers lived experiences give insight into how this language policy looks in classrooms, specifically highlighting where any gaps emerge between the policy goals and the classroom realities.

Bilingual 2030 Policy vs. Classroom Realities

Taiwan's ambitious Bilingual 2030 policy strives to expand the island's English proficiency. However, the guidance for curriculum goals, instructional practices, and intercultural teacher collaboration across schools has been limited. This misalignment between a policy's overall vision and the realities of classroom implementation reflects what Spolsky (2004) describes as the policy-practice gap. In other words, formal top-down language policies do not necessarily guarantee effective implementation at the classroom level.

Research related to language policy points to the fact that teachers are not simply passive recipients of education reform. They are actively interpreting it, with their professional judgment shaping how policy looks in practice. Kumaravadivelu's (2023) Postmethod pedagogy emphasizes the importance of teachers having agency in their classrooms, especially when institutional guidance is not clear. In bilingual education contexts, the role of teachers as interpreters becomes increasingly challenging as cultural expectations, institutional norms, and uneven access to support come into play.

By placing teachers' perspectives at the front and center, this study provides an opportunity to examine how Taiwan's bilingual policy is understood and implemented by those in classrooms. By acknowledging the classroom as an important site of language policy implementations, this research helps support and contribute to larger conversations surrounding language reform, teacher agency, and instructional realities in Asian and international bilingual education contexts.

Methodology

This study followed a basic qualitative research design aligned with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) approach, which emphasizes inductive, comparative meaning-making through rich data gathered in in-depth interviews. Interviews were used as the method for data collection, specifically utilizing a semi-structured interview design. This approach allowed participants to

share, in detail, their experiences teaching in English classrooms, which is a viewpoint most non-educators rarely have the chance to hear.

A phenomenological lens was also adopted to emphasize participants' lived experiences and their subjective interpretations of teaching English in Taiwan. Phenomenology aims to understand how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon, focusing on what participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This made adopting a phenomenology lens a strong fit for understanding how foreign teachers interpret and make sense of their day-to-day experiences teaching in Taiwan.

Participants and Data Collection

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select individuals who could offer both relevant and varied perspectives on English education in Taiwan. Following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidance, a total of eight participants were chosen based on their post-2018 teaching experience in Taiwan and their roles across a range of instructional contexts, including bilingual programs, buxibans, international schools, and private ESL schools. Specific attention was given to ensuring variation across participants' racial and ethnic identities, nationalities, gender, professional training, and years of teaching experience. This diversity was also reflected in the types of schools and grade levels they had taught, which ranged from kindergarten through secondary education. This purposeful sampling approach was intentionally used because it allowed for a wide range of perspectives to be captured. It strengthened the study's ability to gather a more nuanced understanding of foreign teachers' experiences in Taiwan.

Data was collected through eight virtual semi-structured interviews, one with each participant. The questions in these interviews focused on exploring participants' instructional experiences, their perceptions of curriculum and policy expectations, their views on hiring and professional standards, and their experiences navigating cultural and institutional structures. Each interview lasted around one hour and was recorded, transcribed, and member checked before analysis began.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. The multi-phase process began with the writing of analytical memos during and immediately after each interview in order to capture observations, emotions, and any early analytic insights. These short, hand-typed reflections were used as preliminary meaning-making tools that helped in the development of initial codes. Then, open, manual coding was used to identify meaningful phrases and emerging patterns seen across interviews using the participants' own language. These hand-curated codes, along with the transcripts, were then uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose, which supported in-depth, systematic coding and comparison across all transcripts. Specifically, it analyzed the transcripts and pulled all relevant excerpts from them, which were then taken and manually organized into broader categories in Microsoft Excel. After these categories were combined to develop thematic groups. This iterative process helped thoroughly identify recurring concepts and shared meanings across participant experiences. This facilitated the interpretation of broader institutional and policy-level implications, rather than focusing on isolated incidents.

Findings

The thematic analysis revealed three themes that heavily impacted foreign English teachers' experiences during their time teaching under Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 policy.

Systemic Gaps in Policy and Curriculum Implementation

The first finding shared across all participants' experiences was a consistent lack of curricular guidance. Even though bilingual English-Mandarin Chinese education was promoted as a priority island-wide, teachers all reported being expected to design or modify curriculum on their own, commonly without any alignment across grade levels or coordination with Taiwanese local or national assessment systems. Various English schools and programs often emphasized the presence of foreign-taught English instruction rather than focusing on the quality or progress of the instruction, which resulted in a very wide variety of classroom practice within and between schools. Teachers in the study noted that this lack of curricular guidance made it very difficult to scaffold learning in effective ways for their students each year. This made it so the responsibility for bridging gaps in the curriculum fell on individual teachers within their own classrooms rather than being addressed at an institutional level.

Superficial Hiring Practices

The second theme presented was teachers' perceptions of hiring practices that prioritized native-speaker or "Western" identity over pedagogical training and expertise. Participant shared that oftentimes, formal education training, teaching certifications, and classroom experiences were undervalued or dismissed, specifically within private schools and programs. Many teachers made connections to these patterns representing broader global trends in English language commodification, where the concept of "perceived authenticity" outweighed the actual instructional competence and effectiveness of the teacher (Holiday, 2006).

Some participants shared stories about their time working alongside other foreign teachers who had minimal training or experience in classrooms, which highlighted issues like instructional quality, professional fairness, and equity. These types of experiences align closely with Kubota's (2009) critique of racialized and market-driven hiring practices within the context of global English language teaching.

Limited Support for Culturally Relevant Teaching

Many of the research participants also expressed challenges regarding implementing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy. They reflected on primarily teaching using curriculum imported from Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, which did not align with many Taiwanese students' linguistic backgrounds, culture, or exam-heavy education system. While it was common for teachers to attempt to adapt teaching materials to better fit their students' needs, the limited collaboration and time with Taiwanese educators and minimal school and institutional support impacted these efforts. Participants shared that they believe that meaningful bilingual education needs to encourage cross-cultural professional development and shared instructional planning, instead of the current isolated attempts at classroom-level modifications and adaptations.

Discussion

After reviewing all of the findings, it is clear that there is a consistent misalignment between Taiwan's national Bilingual 2030 policy goals and the realities of what foreign teachers in classrooms are experiencing. The national policy has promoted the expansion of English language environments island-wide, but the expansion is not enough when placed against inconsistent curriculum frameworks, inequitable hiring practices, and limited professional collaboration to support culturally sustaining teaching practices.

These findings support Spolsky's (2004) work surrounding language policy and how its success depends on alignment between policy goals and institutional practice. Without any clear and consistent curriculum accountability, equitable hiring practices, and established collaboration opportunities that support cross-cultural professional development, the current bilingual 2030 policy will remain more of a symbol rather than an island-wide transformation.

Conclusion

The voices of foreign teachers in this study uncover a clear gap between Taiwan's bilingual policy goals and the daily realities in English classrooms. Bilingual 2030 has clear goals, but its success is being hindered by challenges, especially around misaligned curriculum, superficial hiring practices, and limited support for culturally relevant teaching. These kinds of issues don't just make teaching more difficult, but they also prevent schools from using proven language teaching methods that are adapted to students' needs and cultural backgrounds.

Bilingual 2030 must become more than just a slogan—it must be backed by actionable, systemic change. For the policy to succeed, Taiwan must prioritize the development of meaningful, culturally responsive curricula; uphold the professional dignity of all teachers; and build intentional structures for cross-cultural instructional collaboration. This study offers concrete starting points for that work and reinforces the idea that foreign and Taiwanese language educators are not just implementers of policy, but essential partners in shaping a more inclusive, equitable, and effective future for English education in Taiwan.

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