

An Examination of Elementary School English Curriculum Plans

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Abstract: In Taiwan elementary schools, English instruction to fifth and sixth graders became compulsory in the fall semester of 2001. In the fall of 2005, Taiwan began English education in the third grade. English teachers are required to design curriculum plans and submit them to the education authority. This paper will mainly discuss elementary school English curriculum plans in Taipei County from the third to the sixth grades in the fall academic year of 2005. Examination of on-line English curriculum plans aims to compare and contrast the practicality, diversity, originality, completeness, and uniqueness of these curriculum plans.

Keywords: curriculum plan, school-based curriculum, picture book, elementary school, English education

I. Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan has initiated curricular reforms in elementary and junior high school education and has placed top priority on the development and implementation of the Grade 1-9 Curriculum. Teaching English to fifth and sixth graders in Taiwan elementary schools became compulsory starting in the fall semester of 2001. In the fall of 2005, Taiwan began English education in the third grade. The MOE has announced three major goals in elementary and junior high school English education: for the students to obtain basic English communication skills, to cultivate learning interests and positive attitudes, and for the students to learn more about foreign and domestic culture and customs. Based on these three goals, learning abilities indexes were designed that fall into three major categories: language proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and integrated skills), learning interests and attitudes, and culture and customs.

Under the new Ministry of Education guidelines, the committee of school curriculum development for each school has consolidated the efforts of school staff and the community to develop a school-based curriculum, and then to formulate a comprehensive school curriculum plan based on school conditions, features of the community, parental expectations, students' needs, and so on. The school curriculum plan includes curriculum plans for each learning area and alternative learning periods. Several relevant items such as "educational goals of the school year/semester," "competence indicators," "units corresponding to competence indicators," "number of learning periods," and "types of assessments" are specified in the school curriculum plan. The school curriculum plan

contains specific instructions on how to instill the six major issues (gender education, environmental education, information technology education, human rights education, home economics education, and career development education) into the teaching of each learning area. The school curriculum plan is submitted to the local education administrative authority to be documented before the beginning of the school year. Parents are notified of the teaching plans for their children's classes within two weeks after the new semester begins (Ministry of Education, 2004).

This paper will mainly discuss elementary school English curriculum plans from the third to the sixth grades in Taipei County during the fall of the academic year 2005. First of all, what percentage of English curriculum plans were exactly the same as the English curriculum plans provided by the textbook publishers? What percentage of English curriculum plans was designed based partially on curriculum plans provided by textbook publishers, but adapted by English teachers based on a school-based curriculum? Did the situation vary from region to region? Secondly, what kinds of modification were made to these adapted English curriculum plans? Were songs, drama, picture books, or holidays integrated into the adapted English curriculum plans? Third, what major problems did English teachers encounter while designing curriculum plans? The end of the paper provides in-depth suggestions on writing English curriculum plans. Samples of noteworthy English curriculum plans are included.

II. Literature Review

All good teachers plan and are well prepared to adapt their plans. Planning a lesson is crucial in language teaching. First of all, planning a lesson makes life much easier for teachers in the classroom. Teachers know exactly what materials they will need during each lesson: magnets, dice, picture books, and so on. Secondly, planning a lesson saves a time because teachers can adapt the plan for future use, become aware of how much time different activities take, and can easily check at the end of a lesson what actually happened. Most importantly, planning a lesson gives teachers security and confidence. Teachers can use more of their energy and enthusiasm to enjoy what they are teaching and doing in the classroom rather than worrying about what they should do next or looking at the next page of the textbook (Scott, 1990, Nunan, 1995).

In general, textbooks are the major teaching resource used by teachers in elementary school English education in Taiwan. Textbooks can be evaluated from the following perspectives: the general knowledge contained in the textbooks, the nature and acquisition of the knowledge, the nature of the language learning, the opportunities for the development of cognitive abilities, and the values and attitudes inherent in the materials (Nunan, 1995).

Using a textbook has many benefits for teachers. First of all, textbooks provide teachers with a clear, sequenced, and structured program, a wider range of material and practical teaching ideas than an individual teacher may be able to collect, a way to economize preparation time, a design for homework and a basis for discussion and comparison with other teachers (Halliwell, 1992, Brewster, 2002).

Students can benefit from having a textbook. Textbooks offers the students a sense of purpose and of progression through the program, a sense of security about what is happening in the classroom, and a sense of independent and autonomous learning, as well as a reference for checking and revising (Halliwell, 1992, Brewster, 2002).

Almost any given textbook will fail to cater to the diversity of needs that exists in a language classroom; therefore, it is necessary to adapt a particular textbook series. Certain concerns should be taken into consideration when teachers adapt textbooks, such as the needs of the students, the types of activities and interaction offered, the language skills promoted by the book, the level of students' language abilities and responsibilities, and the arrangement of the classroom (Brewster, 2002). With a carefully planned lesson adapted from the provided textbooks, teachers and their students will get the maximum enjoyment and learning out of a lesson.

III. Methods

In this research paper, the major research method was the examination of on-line English curriculum plans. There were 207 elementary schools in Taipei County. The researchers used the internet to examine the curriculum plans designed specifically for the fall semester of 2005 as posted on the curriculum web site of the Bureau of Education of Taipei County. Each school designed its English curriculum plans from the third to the sixth grades. Taipei County was divided into nine regions, ranging from remote areas such as the Qi-Xing region, to urban areas such as Shuang-He region.

IV. Analysis

1. Curriculum Plans Provided by Textbook Publishers

Regardless of grade level, about 30 % of school curriculum plans posted on the curriculum web site of Bureau of Education of Taipei County were exactly the same as those provided by the textbook publishers. The highest percentage of schools using and posting the curriculum plan provided by the textbook publishers was found in the urban areas, such as those around Shuang-He and San-Chong. In contrast, the lowest percentage of schools using and posting the textbook publishers' curriculum plans was found in the Dan-Shui area. Most

English teachers in the area around Dan-Shui modified the curriculum plans provided by the textbook publishers.

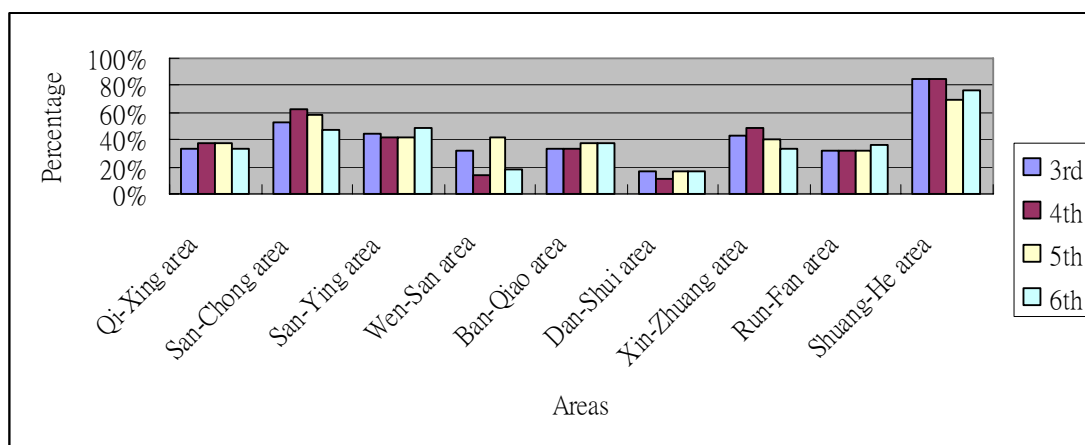


Figure 1: Curriculum Plans Provided by Textbook Publishers

2. Types of Activities to be Integrated into Curriculum Plans

Holidays and picture books were the major themes or materials to be integrated into the curriculum plans in 2005. The Taipei County Bureau of Education has been promoting and subsidizing schools in Guided-Reading by Picture Books for many years; therefore, picture books have been widely used as supplementary materials in elementary schools. Furthermore, integrating culture into Taiwan’s elementary English education reveals the MOE’s awareness of the inevitability of language and culture learning and teaching in foreign language education. In fact, language and culture are inseparably connected. Holidays and festivals were covered in the curriculum plans, including Teachers’ Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Chinese New Year.

Songs and standardized English assessment tests were the least favored item to be integrated into the curriculum. Standardized English assessment tests for the fourth and sixth graders were administered during the spring semester, but not the fall semester of 2005. Since songs were introduced in most textbooks, teachers did not integrate additional songs into the curriculum plans.

Remedial education was strongly emphasized by the Bureau of Education of Taipei County, particularly starting from the fall semester of 2005. It was expected that no child would be left behind in this English education. Unfortunately, very few English teachers included remedial education in their curriculum plans.

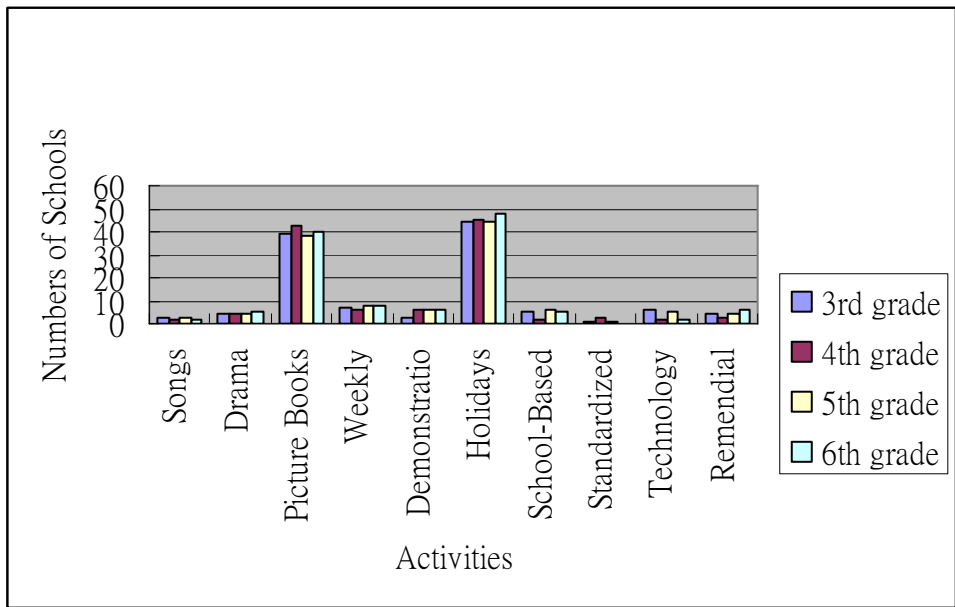


Figure 2: *Types of Activities to be Integrated into Curriculum Plans*

As shown in Figure 3, picture books were commonly integrated into curriculum plans, particularly in the Dan-Shui area, followed by the Ban-Qiao area and the Xin-Zhuang area. Based on the topics covered in the textbooks, such as color, weather, and food, picture books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, and *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* were selected.

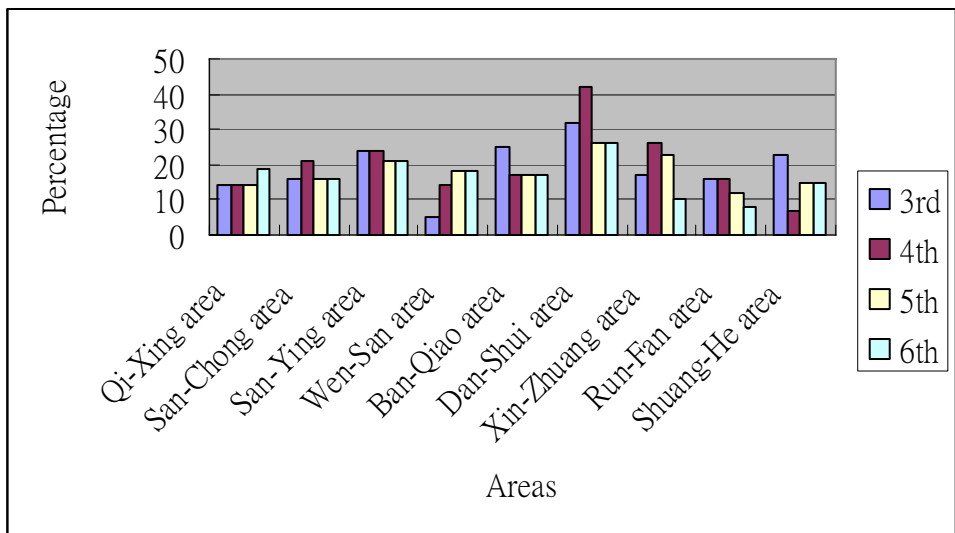


Figure 3: *Integration of Picture Books into Curriculum Plans*

According to Figure 4, while the schools that most fully integrated the school-based curriculum into their English curriculum plans were in the Dan-Shui and Qi-Xing areas, schools in the San-Ying, Shuang-He, and Xin-Zhuang areas did not integrate their curricula.

Each area has its unique culture and customs, such as tea in the Wen-San area and pottery in the Yingge township.

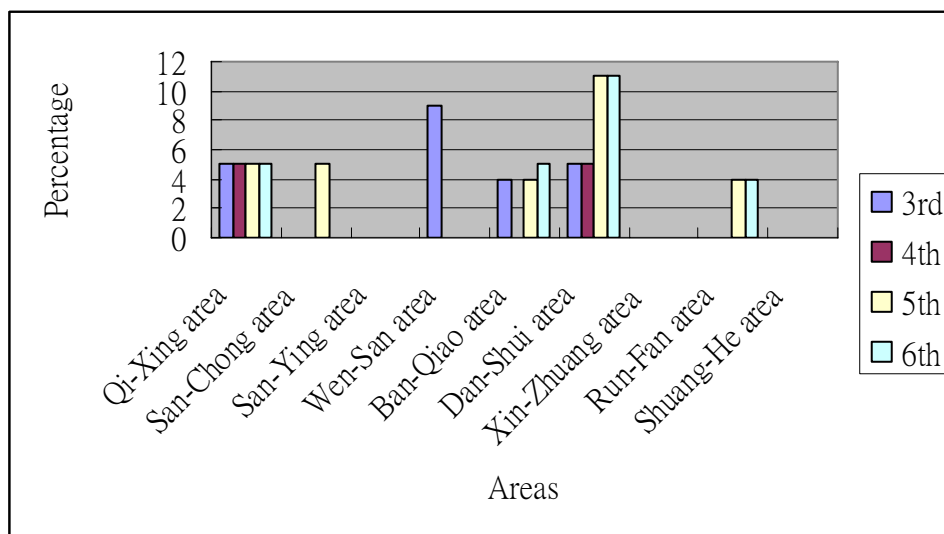


Figure 4: *Integration of School-Based Curriculum into English Curriculum Plans*

3. Major Problems With English Curriculum Plans

There were five major problems with the English curriculum plans. While the curriculum plans included learning objectives or goals, they did not mention learning activities. It was difficult to know how the English teachers would help the students achieve such objectives and goals.

Remedial education was not emphasized in the English curriculum plans. Remedial education was strongly recommended by the Bureau of Education of Taipei County, particularly starting from the fall semester of 2005. It was expected that no child would be left behind by this English education and that all elementary school students would acquire basic English communication skills.

There was no cohesion and or spiral knowledge in the English curriculum plan designs, so that students might learn the 26 letters of the alphabet in both the third and fourth grades. Each school should have each an English learning goal for each grade level; for example, third graders should be able to listen, read, and write the 26 letters of the alphabet, know the basic rules of phonics, and sing songs and chants, while fourth graders should be able to read at a beginning level, fifth graders should be able to read picture books and participate in drama performance, and sixth graders should be able to spell out 300 words. Using this sort of system, students would develop their English skills grade by grade.

About 30 % of school curriculum plans posted on the curriculum web site of Bureau of Education of Taipei County were exactly the same as those provided by the textbook publishers. Each school should develop its characteristics in the English curriculum plans and education. Some schools had their own English broadcast program every morning or at lunch time, and others had their ladders or stairs decorated with printed English materials. For learning to be most valuable, it should be carried out in real situations. Students will feel that English is not just a classroom subject but that it really exists in their lives if they are immersed in an English-rich environment.

Finally, out of all 207 schools, more than 50 school English teachers were responsible for writing English curriculum plans from the third to the sixth grades. This was definitely a heavy workload for English teachers.

V. Conclusion

The following findings were drawn from the above examination of English curriculum plans designed specifically for the fall semester of 2005. Various types of activities were integrated into English curriculum plans, including picture books, songs and chants, drama, reader's theater, standardized English assessment tests, remedial education, computer-assisted language learning, and school-based curriculums. The integration of such diverse sources into English curriculum plans can make English learning and teaching more enjoyable.

About 30 % of school curriculum plans posted on the curriculum web site of Bureau of Education of Taipei County were identical to those provided by the textbook publishers. Therefore, the lack of and uniqueness in the English curriculum plans was a major problem.

Some English curriculum plans were not complete, but too simple. Several relevant items such as "educational goals of the school year/semester," "competence indicators," "units corresponding to competence indicators," "number of learning periods," and "types of assessments" are specified in the school curriculum plan.

There was no cohesion and spiral knowledge in the English curriculum plan designs. In big elementary schools, there were more than three or four English teachers. These teachers often designed their curriculum plans without discussion, so that the same picture book was taught during the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.

Based on the research, the following three suggestions are provided to make the implementation of the English curriculum plans more effective.

First of all, teachers have been forced to redesign the curriculum plans every year. Submitting the school curriculum plans to a local administrative educational authority has been considered to be a procedure without any practical effects in teaching. The local administrative educational authority should emphasize and evaluate on-the-spot classroom instruction instead of curriculum plan evaluation.

Next, it is highly recommended that English teachers design their own curriculum plans based on their own teaching goals, and their students' needs and proficiency levels. Teachers and students both benefit from well-planned lessons, because they can get the maximum enjoyment and learning out of such lessons.

Furthermore, a variety of genres such as cartoons, drama, chants, poems, picture books, and so on should be integrated into English curriculum plans. It is therefore highly recommended that elementary schools, bureaus of education and educational training centers hold workshops on the current popular English teaching methods such as communicative language teaching and phonics, as well as on knowledge and skills other than those pertaining to the English language itself. Take drama as an example. Workshops on stage effects, costume design, scene design, emotional expression, background music, stage action, stage setting, lighting, and so on would be of great benefit to English teachers. Take storytelling as another example. English teachers would benefit from workshops on storytelling skills such as facial expression, sound expression, prop design, body language, and story selection. Using these methods, the integration of a variety of genres into English curriculum plans will be implemented effectively.

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