

English immersion programs needed

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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A study released last week by National Taiwan Normal University found that most Taiwanese elementary-school graduates knew enough English words to read an article in the language. About 75 percent of those tested knew a minimum of 300 English words, which the national elementary-school curriculum deems sufficient for listening, speaking and reading in the language, the researchers said.

However, while a vocabulary this size might be sufficient for reading simple texts, students learning English at this rate would be hard pressed to become bilingual — a stated goal of the government — by adulthood.

An article published by the US National Library of Medicine on May 11, 2016, titled “Vocabulary size and auditory word recognition in preschool children,” said that native English-speaking children could recognize 10,000 words by age five. By age 20, English-speaking adults know an average of 42,000 words, a separate article published by United Press International on Aug. 16, 2016, said, citing the findings of Belgian researchers.

Native speakers can also use these words in their proper context, form complex sentences, pronounce the phonemes and stress the syllables that make up the words in a way that is instantly recognizable by other speakers of the language. If Taiwanese university graduates are to achieve this level of fluency in English, it would require a much greater investment in the language.

To achieve bilingualism Taiwanese need an environment where English is spoken. Mandarin is the dominant language in the nation, but an effective English-language environment is still possible. The researchers spoke comparatively about the number of English-language classroom hours in Taiwan and countries such as Japan and South Korea, but this approach treats English as an afterthought.

Bilingualism can be achieved not by increasing the number of hours English is taught — which compartmentalizes the language in the same manner other subjects are — but rather by making English the language of instruction for all subjects, as well as the language of communication between students and teachers.

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Naturally the government cannot simply issue a decree and have schools nationwide switch to English as a medium of instruction. Aside from being a logistical nightmare, such a move would surely cause a public uproar because of its cultural implications. One solution might be to adopt the approach used by some school districts in Canada, which have both English and French as official languages.

In some English-speaking Canadian school districts, students can choose to enter a French immersion program starting in junior-high school. In some cases both standard curricula and French immersion classes are offered at the same school, while in other districts students are required to attend a French-only school if they wish to study in French.

Introducing a publicly funded English immersion program at the junior-high school level or earlier in Taiwan would be a major expense for the government, but if it is serious about achieving bilingualism by 2030, this might be its best option. The government could seek advice from international schools regarding teaching materials or have Chinese-language teaching materials translated into English.

The program could first be tested in Taipei or in all six special municipalities, and then expanded to other cities and municipalities. The government might initially need to hire more foreign teachers for classes in English, but eventually could rely entirely on Taiwanese faculty.

Bilingualism cannot be achieved simply by adding more English-language classes at the elementary-school level or having students memorize more vocabulary. Fluency in a language requires “living in” that language. If the government is serious about Taiwan becoming a bilingual nation, it will need to offer students English immersion programs.

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