

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT
PROGRAMON TAIWANESE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH LEARNING

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Abstract

This ongoing research investigated Taiwanese 9th grade students' perceptions of a newly implemented education testing system, *the Comprehensive Assessment Program for Junior High School Students* (*guó zhōng jiào yù huì kǎo*). Starting from 2014, along-debated twelve year fundamental education reform was implemented in Taiwan. Along with this new education policy was the replacement of *the Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP)* for the previous testing system (*the Basic Competence Test*). This new assessment as well as the new education policy would undoubtedly make an impact on the students and change students' learning perspectives. With English being one of the subjects in the exam, the purpose of this study was to investigate 9th grade junior high school students' perceptions of the English CAP. Results showed that most students recognized the existence of the English Comprehensive Assessment and appeared to be motivated to learn English; however, the test did not make any difference on students' English learning activities, nor did it seem to have any effect on their test anxiety. As this is a newly carried out education system, it is hoped that the findings of this study may provide some insights for the authorities and English teachers.

Keywords: Education reform, Comprehensive Assessment Program for Junior High School Students, gender difference, English proficiency tests

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Introduction

English has been recognized as an important lingua franca used to facilitate interaction and information exchange in various fields (e.g., business, economics, technology, academia, internet, entertainment, etc). The population of native Mandarin, Spanish, or Hindi speakers might outnumber native English speakers, but when it comes to cross culture communication, people tend to use English more (Mydans, 2007). With the growth in demographics of English users and speakers around the global community, improving national level proficiency in English has become a main focus of educational policy in many countries (Graddol, 2006).

At the turn of twenty-first century, the Taiwanese government started an education reform movement due to an effort to upgrade Taiwan's international competitiveness (Chen, 2011). In 1996, the Ministry of Education began to work on education reform in line with the decision made by the Executive Yuan, a branch of the Taiwanese national government. One of the major changes in the education reform was the extension of the teaching of English from high school to elementary school. Since 2001, all fifth and sixth graders were required to learn English, but from 2005, the required learning grade level was extended to include third grade students.

The implementation of the policy reflected people's attitudes and expectations toward English learning and teaching in Taiwan in a positive way (e.g., Wang, 2000; Duo, 2003); though there were many problems. For instance, there were not enough trained and qualified English teachers (Pan, Weng, & Shih, 2004); the bimodal distribution of students' English ability made it a challenge for teachers to carry out classroom activities (Chen, 2009); there were also concerns of the inadequacy of teaching facilities in rural school districts (Hsieh, 2002), as well as concerns of a discontinuity between elementary school and junior high school English curricula (Chen, 2007).

Considering the need to continuously improve Taiwanese education system, the Ministry of Education (MOE) carried out another series of education reform in 2014. Among which is the launch of twelve-year fundamental education program. The policy is influential in many ways. First of all, after years of debate and discussion, the 9-year compulsory education system, which began in 1968, is now extended from junior high school to senior high school. Its goals include reducing students' learning stress and providing a curriculum that would be tailored to fit individual student's need and interest.

To achieve this goal, major changes were made in the senior high school entrance examination system. In order to relieve pressure from students and to decrease the impact of a test-driven curriculum, the 12-year compulsory education program proposed exam-free admission. The tentative goal for the first stage of this long-term plan is for each high school to reach at least 75% of test-free enrollment, while keeping 25% of slots opened for admission to "specialized program (tè sè zhāo sheng)", which allows each school to recruit students based on their entrance examination scores (Executive Yuan, 2013). However, for the 75% openings that supposedly require no test scores, if student applicants exceed the school's enrollment quota, they will be evaluated by criteria such as their school performance, entrance examination scores, extracurricular activities, etc., in order to earn a place in the desired school they have applied. Therefore, the scores they obtain in the current *Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP) for Junior High School Students* (guó zhōng jiào yù huì kǎo) still play a significant role in the examination exemption process.

CAP is a new entrance system that has replaced the original testing system called *the Basic Competence Test*. It is a new criterion developed to evaluate learning performance of the 9th graders entering senior high school. Students are tested on Chinese, English, math, social studies,

natural science and Chinese composition. There are only three levels of grades in the test: “excellent”, “fair” and “improvement needed” (Formosa News, 2014). Scores obtained from the evaluation will be used as one of the criteria for school admission.

Along with the major changes made in the educational system was the decision to incorporate English listening comprehension in the English *CAP*. When addressing the concerns most people have about this decision, MOE pointed out that listening comprehension is the basic skill for language learning and there should be a balance among the development of all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. If students are examined solely on their reading skills as the previous test (*the Basic Competence Test*) did, the test results would not be able to represent overall English ability of students. Furthermore, based on an investigation done by MOE, approximately 95% of the junior high schools had already included a small proportion of listening comprehension test items in their 7th and 8th grade sectional exams or monthly exams. Nevertheless, they found that students used to start to prepare for senior high school entrance exam as they entered 9th grade; but meanwhile they used to neglect the listening skills and shift the focus again to reading and grammar analysis due to the fact that listening did not use to be a part of the precious entrance examination (Research Center for Psychological and Educational Testing, 2014).

Since the new education reform has just begun in 2014, not many studies have been conducted to investigate issues related to this policy and how students themselves have perceived the changes or what impact it has on their learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate 9th graders' perceptions of the English *CAP*.

Research Questions

Based on the purpose of the study, two research questions are raised:

1. What perceptions do the students have about English Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP)?
2. What kinds of learning activities are implemented in English classrooms?

Method

Participants

A total of 525 ninth graders studying in junior high schools in Taoyuan County, Taiwan participated in the study. They were part of the first group of the students who participated in the new enrollment system in summer, 2014. Among the subjects, 258 (49.1%) were females and 267 (50.9%) were males. Around 21.3% (n=112) of the students reported to have taken English proficiency tests earlier (e.g., TOEIC, GEPT, etc.) while 78.7% of them never had.

Instrument

This study employed a survey-based approach to investigate how students perceived the new testing policy. A 23-item 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire, adapted from Lin's (2010) and Yi's (2005) study, was used for the study. The questionnaire included five parts: (1) student's understanding of the English Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP); (2) student's learning motivation on English learning; (3) student's English learning activities and strategies; (4) student's test anxiety; (5) teaching activities employed in class. Before conducting the research, the questionnaire was pilot tested and the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.86. According to Klimczak and Wedman (1997), a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 is considered appropriate for survey questionnaires.

Data Collection & Analysis

The data in this study were collected by quantitative method during October in 2013. Before conducting the surveys, e-mails and phone calls were made to contact the junior high schools' administrative office to seek permissions. After obtaining permissions, formal research study was administered. Student subjects were explained the purpose of the study and that were taken into confidence that provided information will be kept confidential. It took approximately 15-20 minutes for each student to complete the questionnaire. After collecting the questionnaires, data were compiled and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to reveal how the junior high school 9th grade students perceived the English Comprehensive Assessment Program.

Results

Table 1 shows students' perceptions regarding their understanding of CAP, their level of motivation, choices of English learning activities and strategies and level of anxiety. One sample t-test was used to compare the mean with a hypothetical mean of 2.5 to determine if there was a significant difference among the choices.

Regarding students' *understanding of the English CAP*, all students showed their comprehension of the test ($M=2.81$, $SD= 0.59$, $t= 12.19$, $p < 0.05$). They knew what test items would come in CAP, and they also reported an understanding of the purpose of taking the test. They also showed high *motivation* toward English learning ($M=2.81$, $SD=.59$, $t = 2.40$, $p < 0.05$). They believed English learning is important, and wanted to cultivate their English ability for communication purposes. Other reasons, why they were motivated to learn English, include wanting to surf English websites, understand English songs, books, magazines and movies, and most importantly, they said they wanted to learn English because English is one of the subjects tested in CAP.

When asked if they would participate in learning activities or use learning strategies outside the classrooms, results indicated that the students did not engage themselves much in out-of-class English learning activities, such as listening to English songs, reading English books, vocabulary memorization, practice speaking English or even go to cram schools or tutorsto locate more resources to improve their English($M=2.20$, $SD= 0.58$, $t = -11.78$, $p < 0.05$). Results also showed that students did not feel anxious when preparing for CAP ($M=2.24$, $SD= 0.71$, $t = -8.38$, $p < 0.05$). They were neither worried about peer pressure, noranxious about parents' and teachers' expectations.

Table 1 Students' understanding, motivation, learning activities, and test anxieties of CAP

	M	SD	μ	T
Understanding	2.81	.59	2.5	12.19*
Motivations	2.56	.55	2.5	2.40*
Learning Activities	2.20	.58	2.5	-11.78*
Test Anxiety	2.24	.71	2.5	-8.38*
Total	2.39	.47	2.5	-5.08*

* $p < 0.05$ (1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= agree; 4= strongly agree)

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of teaching activities employed in English classes. Results show that traditional way of English teaching activities, such as read aloud texts and vocabularies, analysis of grammar and sentence patterns, grammar practice drills and sentence writing were used more frequently in class. Listening activities ranked at the 7th place. Interactive activities were carried out occasionally in classroom settings (item 12-14).

Table 2 Teaching activities used in English courses

Ranking	Teaching activity	Percent (%)
1	Read aloud texts and vocabularies	68.0
2	Analyze grammar and sentence patterns	59.9
3	Practice grammar items	55.0

4	Sentence writing	41.0
5	Do practice tests/mock exams; explain tests/mock exams	37.0
6	Oral practice (English conversation)	24.2
7	Listen to English recordings/ Watch English movies or videos	16.4
8	Learn English by language software or online	13.9
9	Sing English songs and rhymes	10.3
10	Play language games or do group competition	9.4
11	Use extracurricular reading materials	9.1
12	Tell stories or jokes	6.7
13	Write short stories or paragraphs	5.1
14	Role play (drama)	3.4

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study suggested that most students recognized the existence of the English Comprehensive Assessment and understood the purpose of participating in CAP. They also showed an intention and motivation to learn English well. However, results revealed that students did not often make use of learning activities or strategies to help improve their English. Similar results were found in previous studies investigating Taiwanese junior high school students' strategy use. Yu (2006), for instance, conducted a study to reveal the relationship between junior high school students' language learning strategies and learning achievement, and found that students used language learning strategies only with a moderate frequency. Similarly, Liao (2000) investigated junior high school students' motivation and learning strategies. Results also showed that junior high school students did not utilize various learning strategies as often as expected. Joseph (2013) pointed out that "students' ineffective learning strategies are [often] linked to poor metacognition" (p. 99). She suggested that teachers need to teach or train students to become

“self-reflected learners”, since most students do not develop these abilities on their own (Joseph, 2006). Teachers can help students to review the strategies needed for success, ask students to make a record of their learning behaviors or to talk about their thinking process.

Another plausible explanation to this phenomenon could be an intense school schedule most junior high school students have in Taiwan, which results in very less time for them to be engaged in other activities. These students usually have classes from 8:00 in the morning to around 5:00 in the afternoon. Some of them even attend cram schools after schools. When they finally reach home, they need to study for tests and work on their assignments. Child Welfare League Foundation surveyed junior high school students in Taiwan and found that around 90% of the students reported not having enough sleep due to intense pressure, overwhelming schoolwork and astounding amount of exams (Tang & Chen, 2011). With all the time and energy spent on schoolwork, around 60% of the students reported feeling unmotivated to engage in other activities or hobbies after school (Ho, Bing, & Chang, 2012). They have only limited time for themselves; hence, there is no point in seeking time for out-of-class English learning activities. Therefore, with the new education policy being implemented, it is hoped that it will allow for more diversification and students will have more time to reflect on what they need, and what their interests might be.

Results also showed that CAP did not make much impact on students' learning anxiety. One of the purposes of carrying out the 12-year education reform was to lower students' learning anxiety, and results of this study seemed to have echoed with the policy. The results also seemed to concur with previous studies conducted on junior high school students' foreign language learning anxiety. Wu (1998) conducted a study on junior high school students in Taiwan and found that the students showed medium level of anxiety. Similarly, Chen (2001) investigated the relationship between junior high school students' learning experience, learning anxiety and comprehension

ability, and also concluded that students showed moderate level of English learning anxiety. Similar results were also found in Chen's study (2012). Chen examined the relationship between English learning anxiety, language learning strategies and academic achievement among junior high school students' studying in Keelung City in the north of Taiwan, and reported that students experienced a moderate level of anxiety. Moreover, among all the factors that possibly affect learners' anxiety, test anxiety was identified as the least effective one. While many studies have shown that high learning anxiety might have a negative effect on language learning process (e.g. MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Krashen, 1985), which is quite common among non-native language learners (Young, 1991). Akbari and Sadeghi (2013) have pointed out that an appropriate level of learning anxiety could play a positive role in a learner's learning process. It would not be practical to get rid of students' anxiety completely; instead, teachers should help learners to utilize their anxiety and transform it into a source of learning motivation. Nevertheless, learners' anxiety could be affected by many factors, such as learners' background, age, beliefs, language proficiency, etc. This study, however, did not address these issues; therefore, a more in-depth and systematic research will need to be done in future to further investigate learners' learning anxiety.

Learning activities employed in English classrooms

The results suggested that teachers seemed to prefer using traditional ways of teaching. Read aloud and grammar practice drills are both considered as elements of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), which shows that behavioral approach is still favored in the classrooms. Interactive activities, such as group discussion or role-play, are not employed much in the classroom settings. Chung (n.d.) indicated that when we examine the course of development of Taiwan's English teaching and learning history, we find that the teaching and learning styles of Taiwanese people are greatly influenced by ALM. Professor Chung once surveyed 121 junior high school pre-service teachers

and found that 87% of them employed Audio-Lingual Method in their classrooms. Similarly, Lin (2010) conducted a study on junior high school teachers, and found that they preferred to read texts and explain test/exam items or grammar patterns in their classrooms. Oral speaking tasks and activities, on the other hand, were seldom carried out in the classrooms.

Summary

The purpose of CAP is to release students' pressure, free students from the large amount of schoolwork, and provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning process (Research Center for Psychological and Educational Testing, 2014). The ultimate goal is to equip learners with independent thinking and problem solving skills, encourage them to think creatively and to express and deliver their thoughts and ideas freely. It is hoped that the new testing system would innovate a test-oriented teaching and learning curriculum and teachers would be more willing to transform their teaching styles from keeping students engaged in repetition and practicing drills to activities that would stimulate students' higher-order thinking skills. Nevertheless, as seen from the results, while most of the participants recognizing the purposes of CAP showed intention and motivation for English learning, they did not engage themselves much in English learning activities, nor did their teachers made changes regarding choices of teaching activities and teaching styles. As the new policy has been carried out, it is worthy to note that education reform requires changes not only from the government, but also from the students, teachers, and parents. How they perceive or believe would inevitably affect the outcome of the policy and would determine how successful the education reform will be. Since this is the first time CAP has been administered, more studies will be needed to further investigate students' perceptions and the long-term impact it might have on students' learning process. Furthermore, the present study merely investigated a certain area, Taoyuan County. Thus, the findings of this study

cannot be generalized to the whole population in the context. Hence, for the future studies, it is suggested that other regions in Taiwan should also be incorporated.

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