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The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education

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0. INEQUITY IN TAIWAN ENGLISH EDUCATION

Inequity in education related to social status represents a concern in Taiwan with abundant evidence pointing to the advantage enjoyed by some students over others. For example, research indicates that parental socioeconomic status (SES) and parental educational attainment correlate with success in entry to higher education in Taiwan (Tseng, 2004). Despite policy increasing access to higher education overall in Taiwan, students from lower SES backgrounds tend to enter lower prestige private colleges whereas wealthier students have greater access to more prestigious public institutions (Chen, 2013; Wang, 2012). This is not because the latter are more expensive (indeed they are less so), but is largely the result of different levels of success on high-stakes entrance assessments manifest between the two groups. Wealthier students are more likely to perform well on these assessments and, therefore, to gain coveted admission to the higher-status public universities. Indeed, the majority of students attending public universities in Taiwan are from high-income families (Lin, 2012). Liu and Cheng (2012) have noted unequal access to higher education in Taiwan based upon differences in family income, parental educational attainment, and rural vs. urban origin with rural students experiencing lower access. Cheng and Jacob (2012) found increasing stratification in access to more selective higher education contexts based upon locale of the individual’s origin with greater access being observed for students from the relatively more affluent areas of Taiwan. Wu (1999) corroborates these results, finding that students from Taipei attained higher academic performance in school than their counterparts from Taitung County, a more rural and less wealthy area in southeast Taiwan. Lin (2012) notes that lower-income households have increased borrowing to defray educational expenses and suggests that the tendency for students from such households to enter less-prestigious but more costly private schools requiring lower entrance assessment scores may exacerbate this situation. Once students in Taiwan actually enter

college¹, those attending lower-status private institutions are more likely to be financially insecure and forced to gain employment concurrent with their studies with the result that the college experience as a whole is quite different between low and high-SES students (Wu, 2009).

Taiwan English education presents particular challenges to equity in addition to those outlined above for education as a whole. Although not used on a daily basis by most people in Taiwan society, English is important in overall life chances of the individual student (Ho, 1998, p. 174). English plays a decisive role as a school subject, is pivotal in high school and college admission and college graduation, is required as a high school and college subject, and is often one component in employment interviews as well as in advancement once on the job. The extension of English study in the schools from its traditional onset during the first year of junior high school into the elementary curriculum has represented one of the most important changes in Taiwan English education in recent years as a part of the “New English Language Policy” implemented from the early 1990s (Chen, 2003). Concerns about inequity have accompanied this shift to earlier English. Chern (2002) found that unevenness in the extension of English into the elementary schools was much in evidence with schools starting English study in different grades depending in part upon available resources. In particular, research indicates that rural contexts lag behind their urban counterparts in English teaching (Chen 2003, p. 164). Chang (2004), contends that in Taiwan “English education at the elementary level does not bridge the gap between the urban and rural areas but widens the gap” (p. 99). Even assuming English classes to be uniformly implemented in the schools, inequity may still be problematic due to supplemental forms of learning. Interviewing elementary school teachers in Taiwan, Ke (2014) found that the extension of English into the elementary school years resulted in a substantial disparity between high and low achievers due to the popularity of English cram schools: Since the majority of students attended such schools, teachers responded by elevating the level of class content. As a result students who did not attend cram schools fell further behind. If earlier language learning is indeed better, then inequitable early learning would appear poised to compound differences in language attainment manifest later in life.

1. STUDY OBJECTIVES

Given the foregoing discussion, I consider the question of inequity in personal English

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education learning resources among students in Taiwan in this study. Previous scholarship pertaining to this issue has been largely quantitative in nature. As a result, research in which the lived experiences of Taiwan English students are examined in a holistic manner has been sparse. Particularly lacking has been work considering students’ own perceptions of inequity in English educational resources. Such limitations in the extant literature on this important topic provide a strong warrant for the present project. In light of this, I focus upon three related questions in this research.

1. What forms of inequitable personal English learning resources are important in the lives of students in Taiwan?
2. In what ways may these resources relate to success in English education?
3. What is the relationship between this inequity and students’ feelings about English education in Taiwan?

2. METHODOLOGY

I based this research upon interviews with 55 present and former university English majors from two universities in which I was teaching in Taiwan at the time. I included both my own former and present students as well as students enrolled in the classes of my colleagues. Participants ranged in age from the late teens to the mid-thirties. All identified themselves as Taiwanese and had spent most or all of their lives in Taiwan. As a result of focusing upon this specific population, this project is able to make statements about the experiences and attitudes of what could be considered to be a group of “winners” in Taiwan English education. These are students whose English proficiency has been instrumental in providing benefits such as employment as teachers as well as representing a means to enter selective high schools and university. Focusing upon this group represents both a strength and a limitation of this study. On the one hand, this research provides robust insights into the role of personal resources in this success as well as the feelings that these individuals have regarding this situation. The experiences and feelings of students with less success in English remain unexplored here, however. Individuals outside of this age group may have different experiences as well; work with such groups could also represent a later extension to the project detailed here.

In constructing my methodology, I was especially concerned with three objectives: First, I wished to allow important themes to emerge from participants themselves rather

than being unduly directed via my own a priori agenda as a researcher. Second, I hoped to learn about the *connections* among important aspects of lived experience with English learning rather than seeking to consider them in isolation. Finally, I was keenly interested in the meaning that participants themselves perceived as attached to events. To attain these goals, I adopted a qualitative approach, especially employing ethnographic interviews. Heyl (2001) stresses that one hallmark of ethnographic interviewing is that the interviewer seeks to understand the meanings that interviewees' themselves place on their social worlds.

Furthermore, I specifically adopted some elements of a life histories or life stories approach. Atkinson (1998) considers that “[a] life story narrative highlights the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime” (p. 125). Faraday and Plummer (1979) stress the connection between a life histories approach and the dual goals of fostering a rich context in which the experiences and perceptions of the individual are robustly embedded and the potential to learn about the meaning that individuals themselves bring to their lived experience. A life histories approach, therefore, has the benefit of yielding an understanding of participants' own perspectives - commonly referred to as an *emic* view by anthropologists — as associated with a broad variety of life events. Although I drew upon a life histories approach, my methodology was narrower in focus than typical life histories work. Most interviews with the 55 study participants involved a single sitting of approximately one hour in length. Traditional life histories work generally entails a more sustained undertaking, even employing multiple interviews as well as possibly the collection of a variety of artifacts such as photographs, letters, and diaries (Fisher, 1991). I felt, however, that a single one-hour interview session was sufficient for my purposes given that my focus was upon English learning only instead of traditional life histories research in which determining and exploring the many crucial themes of an entire lifetime represent the objective. In the case of issues of inequity in learning resources, this overall approach allowed me to move beyond a mere documentary function in which an inventory of forms of inequity would be enumerated to learning about how such forms of inequity articulated with other aspects of lived experience as well as the manner in which participants perceived this specific aspect of their lives.

Interviews involved the use of an “interview guide” with extensive follow-up questions. An interview guide balances coverage of pre-determined areas of research focus with the flexibility to explore unanticipated areas of interest as they emerge in an interview

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education (Patton, 1987). In seeking to capture life trajectories of English learning, I began most interviews by prompting interviewees to discuss their English learning from their earliest exposure to the language to the present. Given my focus on inequity, I was especially alert to exploring variations in personal resources employed to foster success in English learning. Most notably, I was careful to prompt participants to discuss the contexts in which they learned English one by one. This systematic approach — combined with my own probing of responses - served well to elicit experiences with and feelings relating to inequity.

Social theory related to this. Social scientists have adopted a tripartite division of personal resources into financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital in explaining the workings of educational inequity since each of these forms of capital can be parlayed into success in school. Financial capital can be employed for such things as the purchase of learning materials or to hire tutors (Downey, 1995). Social capital - social connections - can be used as a source of important knowledge about educational opportunities or even as a source of personal influence (Coleman, 1988; Mulford, 2008). Cultural capital - the alignment of the culture of school and the home - is generally closer for the privileged since school culture tends to be based upon similar social norms, representing an advantage for such people over others (Bourdieu, 1990). In both eliciting and analyzing the data, I was especially cognizant of the manifestations of these various forms of capital. In the interview phase, familiarity with such theory sensitized me to the potential for many types of resources to be possibly applicable for English learning. As a result, I explored experiences with such resources as the issue arose in the interviews. In addition to being careful to ask in interviews about the details of the various “wheres” and “hows” of participants’ English learning so as to better tease out specifics of individual language learning opportunities, in my data analysis I was also sensitive to these forms of capital in experiences with and feelings about English learning.

I employed several steps in my data analysis. I audio recorded and transcribed each interview. I then created an “index” of the transcripts in which I strove to parse discourse into “chunks” of meaning, tagging each with an appropriate descriptor. Following the indexing, I turned to an analysis of this data. I employed a general inductive approach in which I sought patterns in the data with the goal of creating theory. In particular I made use of “memoing” in order to facilitate and structure this process. An important function of research memos is their role in making analysis systematic and explicit as they “transport the researcher from the concrete to the conceptual” (Birks, Chapman & Francis,

2008). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest dividing memos into three types — operational memos, coding memos, and theoretical memos - depending upon their function. In the case of this research, my own use of memos roughly paralleled these three categories, providing rigor to my methodological process. In the later stages of this analysis I made use of an analytic induction philosophy in which I specifically sought to locate disconfirming data in order to refine emerging theory. In doing so, I periodically left the indexed material and returned to the raw interview transcripts. The fact that the corpus of interview data encompassed over 1500 pages facilitated this, lending confidence in the eventual conclusions.

The notion of salience of themes in interview material was an important aspect of my data analysis method. Where certain themes emerged spontaneously among a number of individuals, I felt the results to be especially robust. For example, in this study when I simply asked what high school English was like, stories of stress and/or competition emerged in some form for all participants. This represents a more powerful result than directly asking participants whether they feel that high school English in Taiwan is stressful because of the competition and then prompting them to describe this stress and competition. In the first case, the participant herself has nominated the topic; it is a salient issue for her. When such instances of salience regarding particular topics were widespread both within single accounts and among the accounts of various participants, I viewed the results as being especially powerful. This salience of themes along with the emic perspective fostering an understanding of the meaning that participants themselves attach to these themes provide strength to the approach employed here.

The focus of this research implied three types of tasks in analyzing the data: These were determining important forms of educational inequity for participants, understanding their feelings about this inequity, and detailing the relationships between this inequity and these beliefs. In the case of learning about forms of educational inequity, I sought to ascertain which forms of inequity were most evident among the group as a whole since for the present study I was interested in making general conclusions regarding this group and about the societal milieu rather than in providing extended vignettes to track how particular individuals experienced English learning. Hence, the forms of inequity presented here were widespread among the participants and, therefore, I contend, important in the society. Grouping forms of inequity into meaningful categories using the analytical induction previously described so as to hone the results represented an accompanying task. For example, I chose to juxtapose supplemental English learning with that done in school in the

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education results but did not subdivide the former into something like weekday vs. weekend supplemental study. This is because I did not possess sufficient data to make such a distinction or to understand its significance as a category unto itself as it was not manifest in the way participants talked about their English learning. It is possible, however, to imagine a situation in which such a distinction *could* be important. For example, after-school study might be more readily available to those having grandparents available as caretakers, an instantiation of social (and perhaps economic) capital, but I can make no such claim in the present study, and this sort of tentative finding would be rejected.

In addition, I sought also to understand individual beliefs. This aspect of the work hinges upon the notion that “beliefs” may be especially manifest in two types of interview data. First, beliefs may entail notions that individuals offer explicitly as declarative statements: *I think English education in Taiwan is unfair because rich people have more chances to pass the tests.* Such assertions are still subject to confirmation, in particular by being evaluated on the basis of whether they “ring true” in light of other evidence. Beliefs may also be manifest in feelings underlying an individual’s point of view, but not directly stated: The way that people talk about events can be important and can reveal beliefs which the individual may not even be able to consciously explicate. Teasing out such beliefs embedded in ways of viewing the social world represents a hallmark of the sort of ethnographic interviewing employed here over other approaches, especially quantitative ones such as Likert scale questions. In this way I came to understand participants’ feelings about inequity, and to detail the relationships between this inequity and their beliefs. This latter objective represents a higher analytical plane in which I was interested in details of how beliefs might articulate with the status quo, especially how they could potentially disrupt or support each other.

3. RESULTS

In the following sections I present the results of this study. I begin with a discussion of how English education in Taiwan represented a “zero-sum” competition for participants. I then consider participants’ reactions to this situation. I subsequently detail inequity in access to the various forms of individual learning resources. I conclude the presentation of results by considering participants’ perceptions about inequity in Taiwan English education. I use pseudonyms for all participants in this study, honoring participants’ preference for Chinese-language or “Western” names in these choices. I was the inter-

viewer in all cases.

3.1 Experience with English as “zero-sum” competition

All individuals in this study had spent most of their lives in Taiwan. All had studied English at least from their junior high school years. With the exception of one who had attended school in the United States for a few years, all had participated in both the high school and college entrance exams. All had earned scores high enough on the English portion of the college entrance exam to gain university enrollment as English majors.

A widespread feeling among study participants was the association of English with competition. I have argued that one benefit of the interview research design employed in this study is that issues of importance can emerge naturally, bolstering the power of accompanying conclusions in light of this salience. The association of English education and competition represents one such highly salient issue in the life histories of participants. In many cases, individuals in this study began to speak about both competition and pressure as a part of their recollections of English learning with no specific prompting along these lines. The following excerpt is typical of this phenomenon.

Chuck: Um, who decided that you're gonna go to cram school?

John : Um, my mom [laughs].

Chuck: Do you know why?

John : Mm, maybe she wants me to, uh, have some basic knowledge about English.

Because, uh, there is some competition between parents [laughs].

When I asked John, a graduate student in English teaching, to discuss the decision for attending cram school, he introduced the notion of competition on his own. Many other participants likewise spoke of the competition and pressure of English learning. I believe that such results — widespread in these accounts - indicate the strength of links between English learning and competition perceived by project participants.

Participants did not simply associate English with a general sense of competition, but notions of English education as a “zero-sum” competition were manifest in this study in accounts of students' pursuit of a finite body of rewards in which English performance served as gatekeeper. This was most notable in the scramble to perform in the high school and college entrance exams since these exams served as the sole means of being selected into high school and college among study participants. These exams assumed a

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education central position in the life histories collected in this study with individuals speaking of the competitive nature of the tests themselves and the grueling preparation needed to succeed. In the following excerpt these feelings are clearly manifest as Vera, an undergraduate English education student, describes how the college entrance exam impacted her high school English learning experience.

Chuck: So how’d you feel about high school English, then?

Vera : Oh, the vocabularies you learn are more professional. Mm.

Chuck: What do you mean, more professional?

Vera : Mm, harder. And they give you a lot because you’re going to prepare for the college test, right? Entrance test.

Chuck: Okay. So do you think that’s a good way to learn English?

Vera : Well, I asked some of my friends and most of them already forget about ALL of them because they don’t use it in their daily lives.

Chuck: Uh-huh.

Vera : Yeah, so I think that’s a defect because at high school we really learned a lot.

Chuck: Yeah?

Vera : Mm.

Chuck: Well, what’s the defect?

Vera : Mm, it just stuffing them inside your brain. But the next day, uh, after the test you just forget all of them.

Chuck: Well, what do you think they SHOULD do?

Vera : There’s nothing we can do because you only have three years and you have to win a lot people in Taiwan since it’s a national test, right?

This excerpt underscores English education as a high-stakes, zero-sum competition. Vera speaks of the power of the test to shape what takes place in the classroom and sees flaws in teaching when strongly geared toward test preparation. A sense of helplessness and lack of agency permeate this account: Teachers “stuff” information of questionable real-world usefulness into students’ heads, but the system cannot be changed given the importance of the impending high-stakes assessments. She also speaks directly to the role of the test as a zero-sum competition: To enter a good university one must “win” against many other people. Again, the strength of this excerpt is also bolstered by the fact that this description of the competition surrounding testing was elicited, not by a direct question

along these lines, but simply by my asking about feelings regarding high school English. The feelings of which Vera speaks in which high-stakes English assessments are seen as zero-sum competitive events serving to narrow the curriculum and to detract from the effectiveness of English teaching were broadly manifest among participants.

Attitudes regarding the hierarchical nature of schooling in Taiwan underwrote the competition for these scarce “rewards” among participants. In the case of high schools, a consensus about the “best” such schools associated with individual metropolitan areas was strong. Participants spoke, for example, of attending the “number one” or “number two” high school in their city. Serena, an English BA holder, noted with pride during our interview that her high school was among the “top five” in Taipei. In the realm of higher education, this attitude was also evident with individuals having strong feelings about the ranks of the various universities. So important are perceptions of the relative status of various universities in Taiwan that those graduating from low-status schools may be ashamed to admit the fact. A university staff member with whom I spoke, for example, admitted to me that she often lied about her actual lower-tier university alma mater if the issue came up in conversation with casual acquaintances. In such cases, she substituted the name of a middle-rank school with which she was familiar. This “pecking order” among institutions of higher education was island wide. Rank was manifest in the entrance exam scores that these institutions were able to require for entry, a part of the “cost of admission,” essentially. Those schools perceived as most prestigious required the highest scores while schools at the extreme other end of the continuum accepted virtually all applicants. Participants conveyed the strong desirability of entry into the “top” universities in Taiwan, noting that especially those attending the few institutions in the very upper echelon would enjoy enhanced employment opportunities lasting a lifetime simply by virtue of the “brand mentality” associated with these schools.

My fieldwork bolsters these conclusions. I documented a public element to the competition associated with high school and college admission built upon such attitudes regarding institutional prestige. In front of one cram school, I observed posters with the names and pictures of students from that school who had attained entrance to the more prestigious universities. In front of two high schools, I observed large banners tens of meters long listing the names of graduates and the institutions of higher education to which they had been accepted. This represented a ploy to tout the effectiveness of the high school and, thus, to attract future students. Notably, these lists were hierarchical: More prestigious national universities, clearly labeled as such, appeared before less prestigious

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education private ones. One clearly knows where one stands in capturing scarce academic rewards in these public displays of competitive success. Such evidence supports the view of admission to higher education in Taiwan as a competitive, zero-sum endeavor.

This competitive, zero-sum nature of English education permeated English learning in the lives of participants, even extending to individual classrooms. Teachers often announced students’ grades and especially lauded the high-scoring students. In particular, many teachers appeared keen to point out the “number one” student in the class, manufacturing an ongoing zero-sum contest within the classroom itself in which the competition was for status as well for the praise of the teacher. For example, Miles, a BA holder in international trade, noted that his “English score was the first” in his class. This culture of competition was both potent and pervasive. Latasha, a third-year undergraduate, contended that students may even end up on the receiving end of high school teachers’ efforts to compete against each other within their individual schools.

Uh, I know some teachers will have competition on tests, on our exams. So they will compare the score such as my class score is higher than you. So some teachers will force their class try harder to get higher scores because it’s a face-saving competition. Yeah, so I think that some people will oppress us to get the grade.

Latasha felt that the teachers’ desire to maintain “face” impacted students who became pawns in a larger school-wide zero-sum game. She concluded that such a situation represented a form of oppression, an indication of her perception of the powerful and onerous nature of these exams and the competition surrounding them.

Participants themselves often couched their descriptions of English education in terms connoting - or even directly denoting - a zero-sum competition. Words such as “win” “lose” “beat” and the word “competition” itself peppered their accounts of English learning. Betty, a fourth-year undergraduate, described her preference for larger cram school classes based upon the opportunity for greater competition — and thus a greater sense of achievement - rather than rooting her preference in strictly pedagogical concerns. She stated that “if there were one-hundred students, uh, the first one is the most winner ’cause he can win, he can [beat the other] ninety-nine and in the small classroom maybe fifty students, the first one, first [in the] class just [beat] forty-nine.” Ying-Wen, a graduate with a BA in English, described transferring into an English major from another university as a situation in which she, as a newcomer, had to “spend more effort” because the

“competitors,” as she referred to her fellow students, enjoyed a head start in the English program.

Finally, this competitive aspect surrounding English often did not end with the completion of formal education. A number of participants spoke of the need to engage in further high-stakes assessments in order to open up employment opportunities. In the following excerpt, Sierra, a graduate with a BA in English, discusses the need for ongoing competition via high-stakes assessments in the form of job interviews and tests after completing college.

Chuck: Um, how do you think people in Taiwan feel about English?

Sierra: Feel. Feel? Mm, I think many people will think English is an important tool when you want to find a job.

Chuck: Really?

Sierra: Yeah. A lot of companies ask you to, um, have an English interview.

Chuck: Yeah?

Sierra: Yeah, so English is a tool.

Chuck: So, in those companies, um, when you get that job, then you have, you have to use English for that job?

Sierra: Not really, but they, they have an English interview.

Chuck: Why?

Sierra: We don't know. They just ask you and you have to pass. For example, like GEPT², TOEIC. Yeah. You have to get that standard.

Chuck: But then when you get to the job, you don't need English?

Sierra: Yeah. We don't know why.

Chuck: Nobody knows why?

Sierra: Yeah.

Chuck: Can you imagine?

Sierra: I think it's ridiculous what, why we have an English interview.

In this excerpt Sierra perceives the role of high-stakes English assessments primarily as a gatekeeping mechanism for employment opportunities: She acknowledges that employment may be contingent upon passing English tests and interviews, but cannot fathom why this should be the case even for jobs involving no actual English use. She indicates only that such practices are “ridiculous.” Sierra's account depicts people in Taiwan viewing

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education English as a means to succeed in high-stakes gatekeeping events rather than for purposes such as meeting people or reading for pleasure, for example. Although individuals in this study did also discuss learning English for purposes of enjoyment or self-fulfillment, the importance of English in competition was universal and powerful in their accounts.

3.2 Response to the competition: Inequity in resources among participants

Having considered the underlying feelings of competition important in participants’ accounts of English learning in Taiwan, I turn to an explicit examination of the issue of inequity in English learning resources. Given these perceptions of the competition surrounding English, individuals mustered many personal resources so as to compete most effectively in English education. Parents were especially instrumental in initiating many of these efforts because they typically began when the children themselves were still quite young. These learning activities were imbued with important manifestations of inequity. In the following sections I discuss important forms of English learning and the inequity surrounding them.

3.2.1. Participation in supplemental English learning venues

Participants took part in a number of forms of supplemental English learning available in Taiwan. Cram school involves private schooling taking place either in the evening after day school or on the weekends. Given that cram school was by far the most common type of supplemental education, individuals in this study had the most to say about these institutions. When I asked John why he began to study in cram school, he replied that this was his mother’s decision. John felt that “parents will like, uh, want their children [to] become better than others. So they will send them to cram school.” Parents frequently enrolled children in cram schools one or two years prior to the beginning of English study in day school explicitly to provide such an advantage. For example, Julie, a first-year undergraduate, indicated that her mother enrolled her in cram school in order to prepare for the onset of English class in the day school. “My mom wanted me to learn some before the class start[ed],” Julie notes, “to get [a] better grade.” Betty noted that she went to cram school in her words to “pre-learn” English. Laura, a former English major and MBA holder, felt that parents send their children to cram school because “they don’t want them to lose at first. Yeah, the first stage.” In light of the perceived role of cram school in providing a competitive advantage, the notion that cram school represented more necessity than luxury was also prevalent. Sierra echoed this feeling, asserting that “everyone goes

to cram school.”

In fact, however, not everyone goes to cram school. Even among those participants who *did* attend, substantial inequity was involved given variations in personal resources. Participation in cram school was widespread among participants, but of varying durations. Only two of the 55 had not attended at all. One of these two, Alice, an English major BA holder, indicated that she had never attended cram school, citing the cost as being beyond her family’s means. Carrie, also an English major BA holder, quit after one year due to guilt associated with the cost for her parents. Other participants took part in cram schools for longer periods. For example, Jean, a third-year English undergraduate, went to cram school from 5th grade for two years to prepare for junior high English. Attending cram school from a year or two prior to the start of English study in the day school was an especially common pattern driven by the goal of providing children with a “head start” in their English studies. Some of the participants, however, attended cram schools substantially earlier. Serena attended an English cram school for more than a decade, from 1st grade through her high school years.

Participants also experienced other forms of supplemental English learning. A number of individuals attended so-called “bilingual kindergartens” in which English serves as the language of instruction along with Mandarin. These schools would qualify as pre-school contexts in North America with children as young as three years old enrolled. Christian churches represented another important supplemental English learning context for a few students. Participants who took part in these classes were not members of the churches in question, but were simply attracted by the possibility of free or low-cost English classes. Samantha, an English BA holder, indicated that her mother found out about one such opportunity and enrolled Samantha and her brother in the courses. Jessica, a third-year undergraduate English major, attended a church English class with her mother. Ella, a third-year undergraduate English major, attended such a class with her brother at her mother’s urging. Although sometimes tuition-free and, thus, not requiring direct economic capital, such opportunities are more common in larger metropolitan centers than in other places and are especially scant in rural locales. Another form of supplemental study was private tutors; several participants worked with such private English tutors one-on-one.

3.2.2. Age of initial onset of English study

Among the 44 individuals in the study for whom age of English study onset data were

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education available, the earliest onset of English study was for Irene, a third-year undergraduate, who claimed that her mother used a stereo system to play English songs to her as an unborn child with headphones placed in contact with her womb. Whether one accepts the value of such an approach to language teaching, it is indicative of the substantial inequity associated with the length of English study among participants. For individuals in this study who were able to provide the precise age at which they began to study English, the breakdown was as follows.

Ages for initial English study among participants

Age	Participants
0-4	1
5	3
6	1
7	4
8	6
9	4
10	13
11	1
12	11

Several conclusions can be drawn from this data. Inequity in access to English learning is evident with the ages of initial English study ranging from infancy to adolescence. Those engaging in English study prior to age 10 had all done so in private contexts such as cram schools and private bilingual kindergartens. The “bump” in number at age 10 reflects dual causes: First, some schools had already begun to teach English at the 5th grade in elementary school in line with new Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) policy at the time when those participants entered. Whether or not this was the case depended on the age of the participant as well as the resources of the school: Only the younger participants had access to such classes and then only if their schools had the resources to offer them. Several individuals in this study for whom day school English learning was to begin at the traditional start in junior high, indicated that their parents enrolled them in cram school at around age 10 in order to give them a solid grounding in English prior to the start of classes in junior high so as to better compete. At the other end of the range of onset was a cluster of eleven individuals who had begun to learn English at the historical official start of English day school study in junior high school at age 12. These individuals were slightly older with their experience predating the MOE policy change, and they also had not

attended cram school. Overall, these numbers are indicative of the push for more English learning and of the wide ranges of English learning experiences even for individuals in this study who arguably represent a successful group of English learners.

3.2.3. Study abroad

Many individuals in this research indicated the wish to study in English-speaking countries in order to improve their English, but only a handful were actually able to do so. Irene, for example, attended kindergarten and first grade in the United States while her mother earned a college degree. Irene notes that “my mother, she really wants me to get this American accent because she understands that students studying in Taiwan, they don’t really get that accent because, um, the teachers actually their accents are so local.” Jerome, a third-year undergraduate pursuing a dual major in education and English, lived in Texas for three years as a junior high student while his mother studied for her doctorate. Peter, a third-year undergraduate, took part in a language program for six months in Australia. Cassie, an English BA holder, attended a summer program in Seattle, Washington. Laura earned her MBA in Australia. Serena attended a boarding high school in the United States, moving on to earn an associates degree in the United States. These experiences reflect familial resources far beyond those available to the typical student in Taiwan.

3.2.4. Parental English tutoring readiness

Unlike most European countries and the United States, Taiwan represents a relatively recently-developed society. In this study, uneven parental educational attainment represents a manifestation of this relatively recent development. Parental educational attainment ranged from one participant with both parents having ended their educations after completing elementary school and several with neither parent having completed high school to a few participants with both parents possessing advanced degrees. For example, Jerome’s parents had both earned advanced degrees and held university faculty positions. Two of the parents of study participants held doctorates from North American universities. The unevenness of parental educational attainment had implications for participants’ English studies since more educated parents were able to personally assist their children with this work. While no participants indicated that English was the primary language spoken at home, a number of parents were competent in English. In preparing for the GEPT, a government-created test of English in Taiwan, Latasha and her mother

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education practiced English together. Peter’s mother was herself an English teacher and also was able to locate English learning opportunities for Peter such as with her friends who were tutors. At the other end of the continuum of English ability were parents having experienced little or no English study in school. As a part of my interviews, I asked whether English was spoken in the home and if parents knew English. While a few indicated this to be the case, others simply laughed or replied “of course not” since they perceived the question to be absurd given the reality of their parents’ educational backgrounds.

3.2.5. Attendance in English-focus schools

Some high schools in Taiwan place an emphasis on English with extra resources such as specially-trained faculty, enriched classes, and native-speaking teachers. These private schools are more expensive than their public counterparts. Several individuals in this study had attended such schools. For example, Walter, a graduate student majoring in English, attended a private school with an emphasis on English. He noted that “[this school] is famous in English.” He went on to describe the school’s “foreign teachers” conversation class in which students worked with materials more challenging than standard English textbooks such as English-language novels. Jerome also attended such a school, and at the time of our interview he indicated that the experience had been so positive that he had maintained friendships with a couple of the native-speaking teachers from the school after graduation.

These experiences were quite different from those of individuals who did not attend such schools. Such participants described their day school English classes as strongly textbook-based and teacher centered with a grammar/translation, test-prep methodology predominating. For example, Felicity, a third-year undergraduate English major, complained that the typical teachers “just, uh, reads vocabulary, the content and the grammar” Felicity referred to this as a “routine” and indicated that although the classes were “a little boring” that “most classes in Taiwan [are] just like this. Just read the contents and write the grammar [and] answer the question. Write or read, but listening is just [less] than writing, uh, and reading.” She felt that although “[i]t is useful for my test, if I want to speak [to] someone in English, I can’t at that time.” Such responses highlight the value of supplemental forms of English education in which students in this study engaged not only in *more* English learning, but in activities scarce in the day school context such as routine English conversation.

3.3 Response to the response: Reactions to inequity in English education

I turn now to a consideration of participants' perceptions of and reactions to the inequity of English education depicted here. These perceptions and reactions to the inequity in English education took a number of forms, especially depending on the particulars of personal experience. As indicated, differential participation in cram school was especially manifest among participants. Those who were able to attend these schools enjoyed the benefits of the inequity in learning resources with better performance and feelings of heightened comfort, content mastery, and superiority over other students. In this sense, their reaction to the situation was generally a positive one in which they viewed cram school as beneficial in their own lives. In talking about English classes in day school, Jean noted that "because I had gone to the cram school and I learned English there so for ME the English classes in junior high school, ah, actually was quite easy." A number of early cram school attendees voiced similar thoughts.

In contrast, a minority of individuals in this study had not attended cram school prior to the onset of day school English study and some had especially poignant recollections of personal inadequacy. Discussing her first English class in day school, Latasha recalled that the experience was "terrible." Because her classmates had previously attended cram school, but she had not, Latasha felt that "[English was] a strange language. I didn't get it. And the most terrible thing is that my friends all of my friends know this language, but I don't know. So I [was] scared. I was terrified." Ming-Ren, an English BA holder, noted that at the beginning of English study in his junior high school, the teacher covered the material quickly on the assumption that most students had studied this content in cram school previously. Several other participants noted this as well: Teachers covered English material quickly since the "typical" student in the class had attended cram school. Indeed, the assumption made by teachers that students had already begun to study English in cram school and thus teaching faster in response renders such cram school attendance more necessary than would otherwise be the case. In this positive feedback loop of accelerating expectations, the jostling to compete feeds its own necessity. Importantly, participants' negative reactions along these lines represented discomfort related to the situation rather than outrage at the system.

An additional reaction to inequity in English education among participants was to blame the victims of such inequity. In particular, this project provides insight into the manner in which some individuals may construct the less-privileged rural resident as opposed to their urban counterparts. This stance of "blaming the victim" for the poor

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education English performance of rural students attributes it to personal choice rather than structural factors. When I asked Brenda, a graduate student in English teaching, about differences between learning English in the city vs. the country in Taiwan, she responded in the following manner.

In the city the people often think English is very important. So, they learn English active, very active. Yeah. But, uh, but in the country, people...think English is not very important. So, uh, they just learn the basic, basic knowledge of English and learn it very, uh, more slow. Yeah.

In this case, Brenda constructs the urbanite with positive ascriptions as being “active” in learning English and prioritizing the language, but the rural resident as being satisfied with “basic” knowledge of English given a different set of priorities.

The opinions of others echoed such a position. As part of her teaching practicum, Sierra, originally from a large city, taught in a small-town school. Many of the students there had not attended the supplemental, for-pay cram schools so prevalent among project participants. When I asked her to describe her students, she complained that only parents uncaring about academics would fail to send their children to cram school. She did not indicate that lack of access due to family income or for other reasons might represent a factor. In the following excerpt, Sierra related her perceptions regarding attitudes toward cram school - and English education in general - held by residents of rural areas to their own lack of caring about (English) study.

Sierra: Um, the people, um, students in cities, they CARE about their scores. So they, maybe they will work hard or more and go to cram school to learn more. Yeah. But students in [the] countr[y]

Chuck: M-huh.

Sierra: Maybe they will think “Oh, it’s fine. English is not important because I just live in this kind of little world. Maybe, I just become a farmer or something. I DON’T need English.” So they don’t want to learn. Yeah. I think it’s a different attitude.

Sierra did perceive that individuals from rural areas had lower performance in English, but she attributed this to personal choice and lower aspirations. For Sierra, urban people care

about English but their rural counterparts do not. From such a perspective, the results of the system can be viewed as meritocratic and fair with lower English performance of rural people being perceived as just because they do not deserve to do well. In a similar vein, Flo, a third-year undergraduate, observed that in her junior high school many students did not attend English cram school. She noted that “some who did not attend cram school did not do very well, but some did.” Considering the possibility of successful performance without having attended cram school, she goes on to downplay the importance of cram school, concluding that, ultimately, English performance is “related to your gift to learn English. Cram school just builds a foundation.” Flo herself attended a well-known cram school in Taiwan from the time she was seven years old. When Sierra, as noted earlier, indicates that “everyone” goes to cram school, her hyperbolic statement is indicative of the relative invisibility of the inequity associated with cram school from her own perspective.

In contrast to such attitudes that would tend to deflect concerns about inequity in access to English learning, several participants *did* perceive inequity in English education to be problematic. Todd, a graduate student in English teaching, recalled working with low-SES students as part of his practicum teaching assignment.

They are low achievement in English means they are poor; their family has no money to send them into the cram school. So they learn slow, they learn English slowly and because the teacher has to teach one or two lesson at one class, but [the teachers] have no time to answer their question and, uh, the question will be more and more. So, at the final step they have no motivation because they did not understand what the teacher is saying about English.

In this case, Todd perceived a cycle of poor English performance having its genesis in the low SES of some students: Poorer families could not afford cram school. The children could not keep up with their peers many of whom *did* attend cram school. Teachers were unable to provide these students with the extra help needed, and these students fell further behind and lost motivation, reinforcing the cycle.

Jean related a similar experience. As a part of her teacher training in university, she took part in a program in which she visited elementary schools to read English books to the students. Visiting a school in rural southern Taiwan, Jean noted that “[in] the elementary school we chose they only have one English teacher. I think the resources was not, uh, how do you say? Equal was not fair.” Jean concludes that “northern Taiwan has

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education more resources. However, southern Taiwan, uh, they don’t have enough resources in teaching English.”

Peter provided a different example of perceptions of unequal access to English education due to family SES. In this case, he discussed how his mother, a cram school owner and teacher, perceived this issue and responded by providing tuition-free instruction to students who could not otherwise afford to enroll. Peter noted that of the approximately 250 students in their school, around 15 were thus not being charged.

4. DISCUSSION

In this study I employed qualitative research methods, drawing upon ethnographic interviews with 55 present and former university English majors in Taiwan to learn more about inequity in Taiwan English education. In providing my rationale for this approach, I noted that such work provides insights into the perspectives that individuals themselves have regarding a phenomenon and the connections between this phenomenon and other aspects of lived experience. In the case of inequity in English learning resources, this study indicates that the relationships among this inequity, approaches to English education in Taiwan, competition, high-stakes assessments of English, and stakeholder’s feelings are especially important. In this discussion I turn to an analysis of these relationships.

At the broadest level, inequity in English learning resources was strongly related to perceptions of competition in Taiwan English education. Participants in this study viewed English education as a highly competitive endeavor, with strong aspects of a zero-sum competition. Experiences with high-stakes assessments especially led participants to this perception since these assessments entailed a competition against others for limited rewards. Individuals in this study behaved accordingly: In response to perceptions of this competition, students and their families leveraged a variety of financial, social, and cultural capital to foster English learning success. This results in uneven learning experiences among students.

Easily transformed into enhanced learning opportunities, financial capital was most commonly used by taking part in cram schools among participants in this study. Notably, many families elected to enroll their children in cram schools and/or bilingual kindergartens from an early age. Initiating English study at an age such as five or six indicates the ability of families to commit considerable resources to learning English. While some of the church classes attended by a few study participants were notable for being free, all

other forms of supplemental English study entailed financial outlay, sometimes substantial. Indeed, the cost of some of these private contexts for English study by children can actually exceed the cost of university tuition. In many cases these forms of English learning began years prior to the onset of English study in mainstream day school. Participants stated that their caregivers took such actions so as to place them in a superior position vis-a-vis their peers once day school English classes actually began, or at least so as not to fall behind the others many of whom also attended such supplemental English learning contexts. Some families hired private tutors, paid for study abroad, or enrolled their children in private day schools with an emphasis on English. Given this situation, this research documents what amounts to a substantial competition-fueled privatization of English education in Taiwan despite English classes being offered as part of the state-supported day school curriculum.

Social and cultural capital also had a role to play in English learning. One way in which individuals employed social capital to foster English was by mothers in this study who levied their social networks to locate English learning resources: Friends especially represented sources of information about English learning opportunities and in some cases these acquaintances were the teachers themselves. Such activities implied other forms of capital as well: Taking part in the classes along with children - as was the case with the mothers of a couple of participants - involves personal resources in the form of free time as well having the cultural capital - in the form of educational background - needed to participate. The most potent manifestation of the role of cultural capital in English learning was in the fact that a small number of participants' parents possessed competency in English by virtue of their own studies. Within this group a select few had even earned advanced degrees in English-speaking countries indicating an exceptionally strong mastery of academic English, a valuable and scarce resource in Taiwan society. Unlike many parents in this study, parents who knew English were well positioned to personally assist their children with their language studies. Given the foregoing role of financial, social, and cultural capital, individual configurations of English learning opportunities were highly idiosyncratic, varying tremendously in participants' lives. Some, like Irene, enjoyed multiple forms of advantage: Irene was a student in an English cram school from an early age, attended an elementary school in the United States for two years, and joined an English conversation club with her mother. Both of her parents knew English as well. On the other hand, some participants enjoyed few of these opportunities with public day school representing their primary or even sole formal English learning opportunity. Most

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education were somewhere in between these extremes.

Negative reactions to the competitive nature of English study were widespread among participants. Individuals were particularly critical of the high-stakes high school and, especially, college entrance assessments of English, but such complaints did not involve feelings of unfairness tied specifically to resource inequity. This criticality centered instead on the pressure associated with these assessments as well as feelings that English learning was skewed toward the relatively narrow set of skills evaluated therein. In light of such concerns, policy makers in Taiwan have recently made efforts to improve the entrance exam system. For example, an interview aspect has been added as a component to alternative means of matriculation to college. Yet such liberalized systems of gaining entry to college still allow higher-SES students to leverage resources relevant for success (Chen, 2013). In the case of these interviews, for example, financial support is required to travel around Taiwan to sit for the interview itself. Beyond this, other resources come into play. I observed this in my own experience as a university English teacher in Taiwan. Our department conducted such English-language entrance interviews as an alternative pathway to matriculation. In these interviews the applicant faced a committee of university faculty, with the questions and answers being only in English. Such interviews imply the command of a vast array of linguistic and socio-linguistic skills, possibly even *increasing* the potential to transform personal resources into success. Indeed, even life-long speakers of English facing these sorts of high-stakes interviews such as those for employment often take part in coaching sessions in which they practice relevant linguistic, socio-linguistic, and cultural skills. Thus, in the case of these college entrance interviews in Taiwan, success in such alternative assessments is still contingent upon the possession of personal resources linked to English. In this case, in addition to general English ability, proficiency with the particular set of language skills important in formal interview success is arguably simply grafted on to the corpus of English skills already necessary to gain entry to college.

This suggests that even in the absence of high-stakes high school and college entrance exams, individuals and their families may be able to deploy inequitable resources so as to compete in whatever selection mechanism is employed to regulate admission to these contexts. There appears to be little reason to believe that this situation will change in any fundamental way so long as English performance opens the door to important opportunities, and people have access to inequitable English learning resources. This is not to say that high-stakes assessments cannot be improved, but simply that this research suggests

that those with greater resources will be able to find ways to better compete in formal English education no matter the particular measure of language performance employed to restrict access to scarce societal resources. Thus, this paper is not so much simply an indictment of the entrance exam system as a documentation of the broader competitive conditions in which these exams are couched and in which formal English education favors those with access to relevant resources, resources tending to correlate with social status. Also, even without these entrance assessments, there are currently other high-stakes life events associated with English proficiency with important roles to play: In this research, participants spoke of the role of English in job interviews and on other high-stakes exams such as the GRE, GEPT, TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS. Abandoning entrance exams would not alter the competition associated with these other assessments.

Overall, then, this research strongly suggests that English is particularly well positioned to serve as a mechanism for social reproduction and status differentiation in Taiwan. The defacto, grass-roots privatization of much of English education in this context in the form of supplemental learning venues especially provides ample opportunities for individuals to readily transform financial capital into language learning success. English language schools for adults, cram schools, and English-focus kindergartens abound in Taiwan, especially in the cities. Simply standing in front of most urban train stations, one can catch a glimpse either of an actual English school, or, at least, of billboards advertising such institutions. In addition to the role of these private learning venues in English educational inequity, this study also provides evidence that the public day school itself exhibits unevenness as well with more affluent communities often enjoying superior English learning resources. Other research has demonstrated this inequity among public day schools, with rural schools particularly lagging in English teaching (Chang, 2004; Chen, 2003; Luoh, 2002). The present project corroborates such findings: Participants themselves observed that the English proficiency and learning resources of rural students were lower, suggesting that although previous research has noted this issue, the problem persists.

Also, English is not routinely used in Taiwan society meaning that access is strongly associated with formal education, increasing the impact of for-pay contexts such as cram schools, bilingual day care/kindergartens, and private tutoring since one must attend some sort of a class to learn English unless one's parents happen to speak English, a rare situation. The fact that English has high value in the society both as a means for success in high-stakes assessments, as a component of in-school performance, and as a skill in obtaining and succeeding in employment means that people enjoy very tangible benefits in

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education terms of life chances when they can succeed in English. The tremendous advantages in employment associated with attending those universities perceived as the very uppermost in prestige in Taiwan add to this effect since entry is contingent upon the demonstration of a number of skills, including English proficiency. Finally, this research suggests that perceptions of the importance of English underwrite its use as a gatekeeper, even in employment in which the language may actually have no role. Knowing English goes a long way toward making one a “winner” in present-day Taiwan.

The wish to go beyond simply documenting forms of inequity in personal resources and to learn more about individual feelings about such inequity represented one impetus for this study as reflected in the research questions. Results indicate that one of the most important such “feelings” was in a sense to not have any feeling at all. Inequity in English education was not problematized among most individuals in this study; Rather, the “feeling” regarding inequity among individuals mostly entailed an understanding of which resources could be useful for English learning. The response was to make efforts to transform whatever personal resources could be used into success in English. It is possible that such feelings would have been different if this study had examined less successful English learners in Taiwan. Although, as noted, individuals did voice strong complaints regarding the pressure associated with high-stakes exams and perceptions of the washback effects in narrowing the English curriculum, they were largely silent on the issue of inequity or unfairness when discussing these assessments. A few who had not taken cram school classes prior to English study in school did convey feelings of discomfort but did not levy critiques at the situation itself as being patently unjust. Thus, this research provides evidence that despite the apparent role of English education in transforming inequitable personal resources into crucial success in English, individuals did not generally perceive this as problematic. In fact, some felt that students lacking in family resources were themselves to blame. This belief would tend to undergird perceptions of English education in Taiwan as essentially meritocratic: Success is earned, failure deserved. There were a few exceptions to this thinking, however, among those who had direct contact with less privileged students as part of their own work in English education and who did perceive the situation as unjust.

It is important to acknowledge here that educational competition itself is not inherently problematic. It may indeed benefit a society to create mechanisms such as competition associated with education to identify and cultivate talent in the interest of most effectively developing human capital. This study actually provides some evidence of the benefits of

competition in English education. When individuals muster resources to compete, the need to employ more resources accelerates as the average English proficiency level in day school classes rises and teachers respond with higher expectations. In addition to being manifest in this study, this effect has been documented by other researchers of Taiwan English education as noted in the introduction. In light of this, this research does suggest that one outcome would appear to be increased overall English proficiency among the populace as individuals jostle to reach the top. The problem is that the results of this study suggests that it is not a case of “when all ships rise, everyone benefits” in Taiwan English education. The competition does not appear to be fair, because it is not equitable. Besides being unfair, this situation is arguably not in the best interest of the society since individuals having the greatest talent may not actually be being efficiently identified. The result may be that resources are not presently best deployed for the development of talent in the populace as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION

The topic of inequity in the competition associated with English education provides an illustration of the relationship among the society, educational institutions and their practices, and individual beliefs and responses. In the case of English in Taiwan, a student’s situation outside of the classroom - for example, whether or not parents simply know English or whether they can easily hire someone who does - can strongly impact the experience with formal education. Also, beliefs about the value of English itself and feelings about the fairness of English education articulate with individual experience in complex ways. Such aspects of English learning in Taiwan highlight the truism that education is not enacted in a social vacuum; what takes place within the classroom walls articulates with political, historical, familial-social, economic, and ideological realities.

Individuals in this study reacted to formal English education by best deploying the personal resources at hand so as to be more competitive. The drive for success in English resulted in manifestations of the “zero-sum game” of English education detailed here. While my interviews certainly provided ample evidence that many in this study enjoyed English for its own sake, attention to this competition, described by many participants as a grueling, high-pressure endeavor, should come as no surprise. This is because the utilitarian goals associated with English performance were important for them given its role as a gatekeeper of limited educational and employment opportunities. The situation -

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education entailing as it does a set of unintended consequences — represents an impetus for troubling the uncritical acceptance of English study as a naive policy pathway to often nebulous and seemingly unimpeachable goals of “internationalization” or “development.” More carefully considering the consequences of such policy and, especially, the ground-level implications for individual lives is crucial given this project’s findings.

While scholars have addressed the role of formal education in general in reproducing social inequality (e.g., Hochschild, 2003), this project indicates that exploring the specific role of English in this process in Taiwan may be especially pressing. Since English is important in the allocation of life chances as a gatekeeping mechanism, and since the associated competition is an inequitable one, such reproduction of inequality would seem to represent an outgrowth of the situation. It is important to point out that in this study I documented inequity of English educational resources and awareness thereof in the life histories of a group of English learners who were successful enough to have become university English majors and to sit for a research interview in English. Further research along the lines of this study including less successful English learners in Taiwan is strongly warranted given the possibility of even greater — and more influential — degrees of inequity in learning resources. Their perceptions are important to understand as well.

Finally, the research presented here raises the disturbing scenario that, for EFL practitioners, in some cases the more effectively one fosters language learning in one’s classes, the more effectively one may actually be serving to entrench social stratification. Seriously questioning high-stakes assessments represents one specific step to addressing this situation. More fundamental, however, is the need to trouble the myth that English education represents a politically neutral, inherently meritocratic endeavor. There is no reason to believe that the situation described in this study is confined to Taiwan. In the case of all societies where formal English learning has a role in substantially increasing life chances for students - and in which access to learning is inequitable - the need to ask hard questions about the institution of formal English education is especially acute.

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Notes

- 1 Unless explicitly noted, I adopt North American usage of the term “college” to represent all forms of post-secondary education, including university.
- 2 The Taiwan General English Proficiency Test

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《SUMMARY》

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education

Charles Allen BROWN

Inequity in educational resources has been a subject of concern in Taiwan with equal access to English learning representing one aspect of this challenge. Despite scholarly attention to the issue of educational inequity, little research along these lines has been robustly rooted in experiences and perspectives of English students themselves. In light of this, in the qualitative study detailed here I drew upon accounts of English learning collected from 55 university English majors in Taiwan in order to understand students’ lived experience with and perceptions of inequity in English educational resources. The results include several important findings linking inequitable learning resources and perceptions of competition in English education in Taiwan society. First, study participants understood English education in Taiwan as entailing aspects of a zero-sum competition. High-stakes high school and college entrance assessments were pivotal in this perception since these assessments feature English as one of the tested subjects, since they were perceived as competitive, and since the rewards — in the form of entry to prestigious institutions — were limited. This study suggests that the competitive aspects of English learning in Taiwan extend beyond academic settings to employment opportunities accessed via high-stakes English tests and English-language job interviews, as well as by the enhanced personal marketability associated with the prestige of attending more selective universities. Second, participants and their families acted accordingly, using a variety of personal resources to support English learning. Individuals transformed these inequitable resources into access to educational and employment opportunities by using them to foster enhanced English performance. In this way, formal English education represents a mechanism whereby access to personal learning resources ultimately translates into increased life chances in Taiwan. In terms of feelings about the situation, while participants strongly decried the *competition* surrounding English education in Taiwan, concern with *inequity* in access to English learning resources represented a much less salient issue in their accounts of English learning. While a few participants did perceive inequity in

The academic competition “winner’s” blindness to resource inequity in Taiwan English education English learning resources to be a problematic issue, most did not and even felt that the victims of this inequity were themselves to blame. This latter attitude would tend to bolster a meritocratic ideology of English education and to arguably deflect criticism levied against it on the basis of inequity. Given this situation of inequity and competition in Taiwan formal English education, this research provides evidence for the role of formal English education in Taiwan in the reproduction of inequality in that society.