



Research Trends in Selected M.A. TESOL Programs in Taiwan: A Preliminary Content Analysis of Master's Theses from 2003-2007

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This paper examines the research trends in selected master's programs of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) by analyzing the master's theses produced between 2003 and 2007. Seven TESOL graduate programs in different national universities, which also provide a secondary teacher education program, were selected. Data consisted of 493 thesis abstracts retrieved from the *Electronic Theses and Dissertations System* of National Digital Library. Using a content-analysis method, we identified the education levels of research contexts and research topics to present current research trends in Taiwan TESOL programs. The analysis of the research contexts showed that the two most common contexts were secondary education in high school and undergraduate education in universities. Although the nature of the master's theses selected spans a wide range of research topics and varies across different programs, the preliminary analysis identified the four most frequently investigated topics were: (1) language skills, including research on listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, (2) teaching methods or approaches, (3) materials or curriculum and computer assisted language learning (CALL) tying for third. The patterns of the research agenda on English education in Taiwan reflected in the thesis research are briefly discussed in relation to different graduate program characteristics, local English educational issues, and global research trends in TESOL. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide not only an overview of current research trends in TESOL programs in Taiwan but also new insights for future research directions and development for both TESOL master's students and researchers as they consider research topics to explore.

Key Words: TESOL, research trends, master's thesis, content analysis, and Taiwan

Introduction

Writing a thesis is an important endeavor for most, if not all, graduate students. The thesis is the end product and record of students' years of academic training and research efforts. In Taiwan, as in many countries, the completion of thesis research in scholarly written form is expected for all master's students. For most master's students in Taiwan, the thesis project is often their first major piece of independent research they undertake. Currently, there are at least 34 colleges or universities offering master's programs in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or related fields in Taiwan. Hundreds of master's theses are produced each year. There is, however, a paucity of research that systematically analyzes the content of the thesis projects and provides a general trend for reference. Information about the research trends in the TESOL graduate programs is essential for both novice student researchers as well as faculty advisors to be updated with the current state of affairs in English teaching in Taiwan. Such type of content analysis studies have been done in a number of professional fields (see review by Shih, Feng, & Tsai, 2008), such as psychology, science education, and instructional technology, management, communication studies, and engineering etc.

The present study originated from the first author's experience of teaching a research method class in a TESOL master's program and reading a recent article by Shih, Feng, and Tsai (2008) who conducted a content analysis of journal articles in the field of cognition in e-learning. Shih et al. presented the research trends in their field of interest by analyzing the participants, research setting, research design type, and examined methods used in articles published in five target professional journals between the years 2001 and 2005. They argued that knowledge about the publishing research trends in major journals of the field can assist educators as well as novice and senior researchers in recognizing research trends and influential studies in the field. In addition, the findings can serve as important references for policy makers in related fields when considering relevant issues.

In the field of TESOL, however, articles addressing research trends are mostly in the form of literature review instead of quantitative content analysis (Hakuta & Cancino, 1977; Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005). For example, Canagarajah (2006) in a state-of-the-art

essay delineated three tendencies that characterize the TESOL professional practice in the 40th anniversary issue of *TESOL Quarterly*; these three tendencies described are: “a continuation along the earlier lines of progression” discussed in the 25th anniversary issue, “a radical reorientation along new paradigms”, and “unresolved debates and questions about the direction in certain domains” (p. 23-28). A few other studies in the field used quantitative method to analyze trends in research methodology, not research topics, in the field of TESOL or applied linguistics (e.g., Gao, Li, & Lu, 2001; Henning, 1986; Lazaraton, 2000; Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005). The present paper is interested in the nature and prevalence of specific research contexts and research topics in the TESOL master’s theses produced in selected TESOL graduate programs in Taiwan. This preliminary content analysis of the TESOL master’s theses may provide an overview of current research trends in TESOL programs in Taiwan. Specifically, the findings may further offer insight for future research directions and assistance to both TESOL master’s students and researchers when they consider research topics to explore.

In view of the potential significance and lack of information of the research trends observed in the selected TESOL master’s theses in Taiwan, four questions were addressed as follows:

1. What are the common research contexts examined in the TESOL master’s theses in Taiwan? How do the types of research contexts vary across different graduate programs?
2. What are the prevalent research topics investigated in the TESOL master’s theses in Taiwan? How do the prevalent topics vary across different graduate programs?
3. How did the frequently investigated research contexts and topics in the TESOL master’s theses change over these five years?

Method

M.A. Theses for Analysis

The present study was exploratory in nature and only selected master’s theses produced in seven TESOL graduate programs in Taiwan between 2003 and 2007 for a content analysis. The seven selected TESOL programs were in seven different national

universities, including National Chung Cheng University (CCU), National Chengchi University (NCCU), National Chiao Tung University (NCTU), National Changhua University of Education (NCUE), National Kaohsiung Normal University (NKNU), National Tsing Hua University (NTHU), and National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU). These graduate programs are similar in that they all reside in national universities which also provide a secondary teacher education program. All TESOL programs, except one, produced master's theses each year from 2003 to 2007. The TESOL graduate program in NCTU was established in 2003, and the first cohort of master's theses was not completed until 2005, resulting in only 14 theses in total. The research sample includes 493 master's thesis abstracts retrieved from the *Electronic Theses and Dissertations System* of the National Digital Library.

Types of Research Contexts

Research contexts refer to the educational levels of research participants or target research sites. Each thesis was classified into one of the following eight categories: (1) preschool (P), such as kindergartens; (2) elementary school (E); (3) high school (HS), including junior and senior high schools and vocational high schools; (4) Grade 1-9 Curriculum (G19); (5) higher education, including junior colleges, universities, and post-graduate levels (HE); (6) adults (A); (7) private institute (PI), including language schools and cram schools; and (8) mixed levels of participants (MIX).

Categories of Research Topics

The categorization for research topics was modified from the list of content areas specified in the TESOL 2009 convention proposal worksheet (TESOL, 2009). The researchers identified and classified the research topic of each thesis into one of the following 14 areas: (1) Affective Factors; (2) Computer Assisted Language Learning; (3) Culture, Social, or Gender Issues; (4) English for Specific Purposes; (5) Integrated Skills (IS); (6) Learner Development; (7) Linguistics; (8) Language Skills; (9) Materials or Curriculum Design and Evaluation; (10) Second Language Development; (11) Testing and Evaluation; (12) Teacher Factors; (13) Teaching Method; and (14) Teacher Professional Development. The following list provides examples of some typical content areas in each category.

1. Affective Factors (AF): Learner's motivation; anxiety; belief; need; self-perception.
2. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): Computers, multimedia, the use of technology in teaching or learning.
3. Culture, Social, or Gender Issues (CSG): Cross-cultural studies; cultural learning; multicultural or ethnic issues; gender differences; bilingualism; socioeconomic status; family factors.
4. English for Specific Purposes (ESP): ESP program; English for academic purpose; English for occupational purposes.
5. Integrated Skills (IS): Studies on the combination of two or more language skills.
6. Learner Factors (LF): Individual difference; prior learning; cognitive development; conception.
7. Linguistics (LIN): Studies related to phonetics; morphology; syntax; discourse analysis; pragmatics; sociolinguistics; psycholinguistics; neurolinguistics.
8. Language Skills (LS): Listening; speaking and communication (including pronunciation); reading (including phonological awareness, metalinguistic awareness, or phonics); writing (including spelling); vocabulary; grammar.
9. Materials or Curriculum Design and Evaluation (MC): Teaching or learning materials (including supplementary materials, projects, or tasks); curriculum design and/or evaluation.
10. Second Language Acquisition (SLA): SLA studies; interlanguage studies.
11. Testing and Evaluation (TEVAL): Language tests; achievement tests; portfolio assessment; peer evaluation; GEPT test; college entrance exam.
12. Teacher Factors (TF): Teachers' beliefs; personality; attitude; aptitude; pedagogical or content knowledge; teacher behaviors and strategies.
13. Teaching Method (TM): Teaching methods, such as communicative language teaching, audiolingual or direct method, task-based approach; the application of specific teaching activities, such as drama, jazz chants, storytelling, or debates.
14. Teacher Professional Development (TPD): Pre- or in-service English teacher training or programs; team teaching; tour study program for teachers.

Procedures

The two researchers first randomly chose 20 thesis abstracts and independently conducted a preliminary coding based on the categories for *Content Area and Targeted Instructional Level* listed in TESOL convention proposal worksheet. Final coding categories were then discussed and adjusted to reflect the characteristics of master's theses in Taiwan TESOL programs. For example, accreditation and AIDS education are not typical thesis topics, and so were deleted. In addition, more instructional levels (e.g., Grade 1-9 Curriculum, language school, and mixed levels) were added to better represent the actual English instructional contexts in Taiwan. Next, 20 per cent of the thesis abstracts (i.e., a total of 100 theses) were randomly chosen from each of the seven TESOL programs and independently coded by both researchers using the revised coding scheme. Inter-rater agreement in the coding of educational levels was 0.98, and 0.95 in the coding of research topics. The two researchers met again to discuss and resolve the disagreements. The remaining thesis abstracts were then categorized by the second author following the coding scheme.

Results

Common Research Contexts Examined in TESOL Master's Theses

Table 1 presents both the numbers and percentages for each research context examined in the master's theses completed between 2003 and 2007 in the selected TESOL programs. The analysis of the research contexts indicated that the three most common research contexts were high school (66%), higher education (17%), and elementary school (11%). Further analyses of the common research contexts across the seven TESOL programs, however, showed slight variations among these master's programs (Figure 1). For example, while high school settings were the primary research context examined in the theses produced in most TESOL programs, ranging from 56% to 88%, the higher education context was the major context of research interest in NCTU and NTHU, constituting 79% and 61%, respectively. In addition, elementary school settings have also started gaining attention and ranked the second most examined context in three programs, CCU (21%), NCCU (8%), and NKNU (14%).

Table 1 Numbers and percentages of research contexts in master’s theses in individual TESOL programs from 2003-2007

Research context	Total	CCU (47) ^a	NCCU (73)	NCTU (14)	NCUE (58)	NKNU (203) ^b	NTHU (41)	NTNU (57)
Preschool	2 (0.4%)	1 (2.1%)	0	0	0	1 (0.5%)	0	0
Elementary school	53 (10.8%)	10 (21.3%)*	6 (8.2%)*	0	2 (3.4%)	28 (13.8%)*	3 (7.3%)	4 (7.0%)
High school	324 (65.7%)*	32 (66%)*	64 (87.7%)*	3 (21.4%)*	39 (67.2%)*	143 (70.4%)*	12 (29.3%)*	32 (56.1%)*
Grade 1-9	8 (1.6%)	2 (4.3%)	1 (1.4%)	0	0	1 (0.5%)	0	4 (7.0%)
Higher education	83 (16.8%)*	2 (4.3%)	2 (2.7%)	11 (78.6%)*	15 (25.9%)*	13 (6.4%)	25 (61.0%)*	15 (26.3%)*
Adult English	10 (2.0%)	1 (2.1%)	0	0	0	8 (3.9%)	0	1 (1.8%)
Private Institute	1 (0.2%)	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2.4%)	0
Mixed	11 (2.2%)	0	0	0	2 (3.4%)	8 (3.9%)	0	1 (1.8%)

Note. ^aTotal numbers of theses are in parentheses. ^bResearch context was not specified in one thesis abstract and the full text is not available. *Top two research contexts.

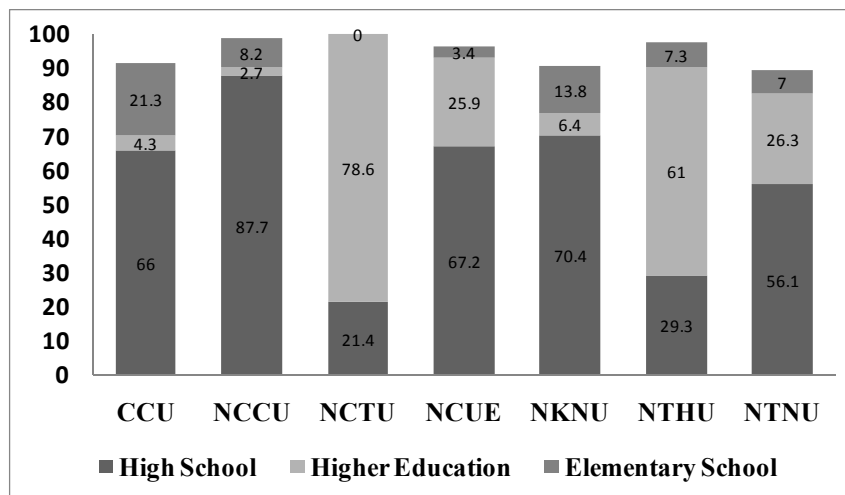


Figure 1 Percentages of three common research contexts across the seven TESOL master’s program

Prevalent Research Topics Investigated in TESOL Master’s Theses

The analysis of research topics examined in the TESOL master’s theses is shown in Table

2. *Language Skills* were the most frequently investigated topics with 27%; topics related to *Teaching Method* ranked second with 20%, followed by *CALL* and *Materials and Curriculum*, both contributing about 12% of all thesis projects. As shown in Table 2, great variation in popular research topics was found across the seven TESOL programs. In particular, *Language Skills* and *Teaching Methods* together were the top two research topics addressed in more than or nearly half of all theses in four programs (i.e., CCU, NCCU, NCUE, and NKNU). On the other hand, *CALL* was the primary focus of thesis research in two TESOL programs (i.e., NCTU and NTHU), both of which reside in universities that are eminent in the fields of science and engineering. In contrast, the master's theses produced in the other five programs (i.e., CCU, NCCU, NCUE, NKNU, and NTNU) appeared to have more diversity in their topics.

Table 2 Numbers and percentages of research topics in master's theses in individual TESOL programs from 2003-2007

Research topic	Total	CCU (47) ^a	NCCU (73)	NCTU (14)	NCUE (58)	NKNU (203)	NTHU (41)	NTNU (57)
AF	44 (8.9%)	2 (4.3%)	5 (6.8%)	3 (21.4%)*	9 (15.5%)	17 (8.4%)	2 (4.9%)	6 (10.5%)
CALL	59 (12.0%)	2 (4.3%)	3 (4.1%)	7 (50.0%)*	2 (3.4%)	24 (11.8%)	16 (39.0%)*	5 (8.8%)
CSG	9 (1.8%)	2 (4.3%)	2 (2.7%)	0	0	5 (2.5%)	0	0
ESP	6 (1.2%)	0	0	0	1 (1.7%)	4 (2.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0
IS	8 (1.6%)	1 (2.1%)	0	0	2 (3.4%)	3 (1.5%)	0	2 (3.5%)
LF	8 (1.6%)	1 (2.1%)	0	0	2 (3.4%)	4 (2.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0
LIN	17 (3.4%)	5 (10.6%)	4 (5.5%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (1.7%)	3 (1.5%)	0	3 (5.3%)
LS	131 (26.6%)*	7 (14.9%)*	19 (26.0%)*	2 (14.3%)	21 (36.2%)*	55 (27.1%)*	11 (26.8%)*	16 (28.1%)*
MC	60 (12.4%)	4 (8.5%)	7 (9.6%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (3.4%)	31 (15.3%)	5 (12.2%)	11 (19.3%)*
SLA	5 (1.0%)	0	1 (1.4%)	0	1 (1.7%)	0	0	3 (5.3%)
TEVAL	22 (4.5%)	4 (8.5%)	3 (4.1%)	0	0	11 (5.4%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (5.3%)
TF	20 (4.1%)	3 (6.4%)	9 (12.3%)	0	6 (10.3%)	0	0	2 (3.5%)
TM	98 (19.9%)*	16 (34.0%)*	18 (24.7%)*	0	11 (19.0%)*	45 (22.2%)*	4 (9.8%)	4 (7.0%)
TPD	5 (1.0%)	0	2 (2.7%)	0	0	1 (0.5%)	0	2 (3.5%)

Note. ^aTotal numbers of theses are in parentheses.

*Top two research contexts.

Trends in Frequently Investigated Research Contexts and Topics in TESOL Master's Theses

Percentage changes in the top three research contexts examined in TESOL master's theses (i.e., high school, higher education, and elementary school) were used to demonstrate trends that occurred between 2003 and 2007. Across the five years, high school settings remained the primary research contexts examined in the TESOL master's theses, with a marked decline from 80% to 57% in 2005 (Figure 2). Studies conducted in the higher education context rose by more than 10% in 2005 and 2006, from 12% to 25% and 23%, respectively, and then dropped back to 14% in 2007. The percentages of thesis research in the elementary school context had seen a relatively steady increase over the five years, from only 7% in 2003 to 18% in 2007.

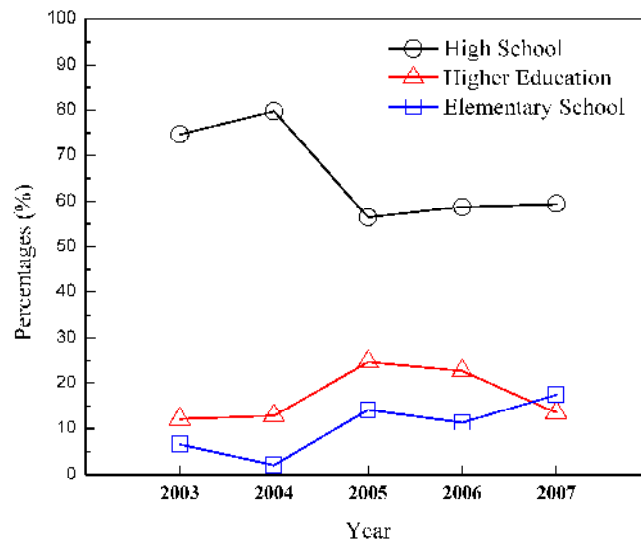


Figure 2 Trends of frequently investigated research contexts in TESOL master's theses from 2003 to 2007.

Percentage changes in the top four research topics, on the other hand, were not as pronounced as those observed in the frequently investigated contexts (Figure 3). The category *Language Skills* consistently ranked as the most frequently researched topic within these five years, with a small decrease from 29% to 24% during the first three

years, a modest increase to 32% in 2006, and finally dropping back to 22% in 2007. Another topic of high interest is *Teaching Method*, whose percentage changes were not prominent. On average, both *Materials/Curriculum* and *CALL* each contributed 12% to the total theses. While the proportions of thesis research that was geared towards *Materials or Curriculum* remained relatively constant across the years, *CALL* appeared to emerge as an important topic with a somewhat marked increase.

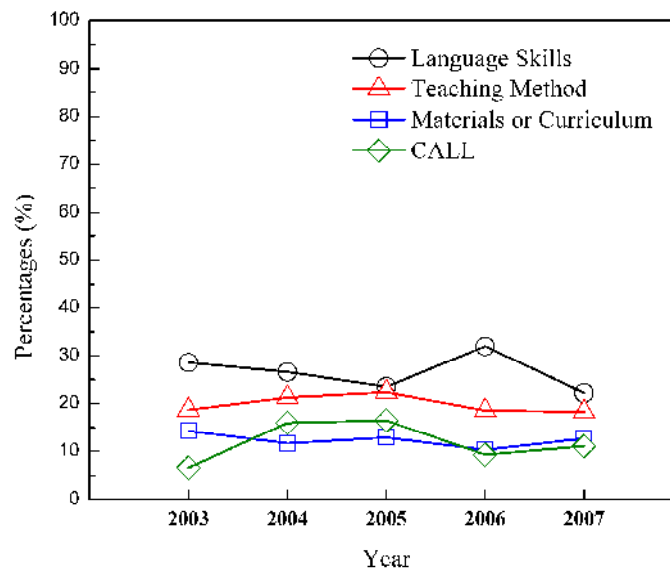


Figure 3 Trends of frequently investigated research topics in TESOL master's theses from 2003 to 2007

Discussion and Conclusion

Even though the present study is descriptive in nature and limited in scope, the results still present an overall picture of the research trends in the TESOL master's programs in Taiwan. In reviewing 493 master's theses produced between 2003 and 2007, three research contexts and four research topics were identified as the most frequently investigated ones. By analyzing the percentage changes in the top research contexts and topics across these five years, several emerging trends were observed.

Our analysis of the research contexts showed that the majority of TESOL master's theses were conducted in high school settings. This finding coincided with the general observation of the program characteristics and educational objectives of these TESOL programs. All these seven programs reside in universities which also provide secondary

teacher education programs. Most graduate students in these programs were either working on high school teacher certification or had completed the course requirements for teacher certification. Some were even in-service high school teachers seeking continuing education. Working with high school participants or considering issues related to high school education appears compatible with their career orientation and goals. On the other hand, the higher education context, including college, university, and post-graduate level, was the most commonly examined research context for two programs and ranked second for two other programs. For many novice student-researchers, the ease of access to research sites or participants can be the major concern. It is not surprising that college students were often included as convenient samples in thesis research. In addition to the issue of access, research interest of the student's thesis advisor may also play a role in choosing the research context.

Research topic analysis indicated that the master theses examined in the present study undertook research in a range of TESOL areas with more emphasis placed on a few popular topics. As shown in the research topic trend analysis, the prominence of pedagogically oriented (e.g., *Language Skills* and *Materials or Curriculum*) and method-based research (e.g., *Teaching Method* and *CALL*) was observed in the TESOL master's theses. Master's students' choice of a thesis topic can be affected by several factors or an interaction of these factors, such as personal interest, career aspiration, research training received, program characteristics, or advisor's research interest. Research experience and practical value obtained from completing thesis research relevant to language pedagogy would benefit these student researchers if they ever embarked on teaching. Further studies, such as qualitative or survey research, are required to more accurately characterize factors affecting TESOL graduate students' choice of research topics.

In contrast, several research topics, such as *Culture, Social, or Gender Issues, English for Specific Purposes, Second Language Acquisition, Teacher Factors, and Teacher Professional Development*, were rarely examined in the TESOL theses. It is likely that to conduct research on some of these topics requires more complex methodology design or relies on more extensive theoretical training, both of which could be difficult to achieve in a two- to three-year master's program. Other research topics, such as *English for Specific Purposes* and *Teacher Professional Development*, might still be in their early stage of research development. It is interesting to note

that several least-frequently investigated topics resembled the new research direction for TESOL research proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006) in the 40th anniversary issue of *TESOL Quarterly*. He advocated that the current research scope be extended from the microstructure inquiry (e.g., method-based pedagogies) to the macrostructures of social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics in language use. Specifically, he stated that “the vitality of macrostructures... [can help] shape and reshape the microstructures of our pedagogic enterprise” (p. 75). By pointing out the dearth of research on specific master thesis topics, we offer ideas for future research and suggestions for enriching the curriculum in the current TESOL master’s programs in Taiwan.

Although the number of TESOL programs in the present study is limited, several preliminary trends in research contexts and topics emerged from the selected master’s theses across the five years. The findings have implications for both TESOL graduate students and their graduate programs. For graduate students, the information of research trends can assist them in developing, implementing, and evaluating their thesis research. For graduate programs, attention to the trends provides direction for curriculum improvement and better thesis supervision.

Acknowledgement

The study was supported in part by a grant to the first author from the National Science Council of Taiwan (NSC 98-2410-H-009-035). Portions of this article were presented at the 2010 *Asian EFL Journal International Conference*, Providence University, Taiwan.

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