

Perceived Changes in the English Language Ability of Freshmen at a University in Taiwan

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This study investigates possible changes in students' English language ability by means of a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced university teachers. The questionnaire measures changes in six domains: grammar, reading, listening, speaking, writing, and attitudes. The results of the questionnaire indicate that over the last decade a majority of teachers perceived that their students' grammar, reading, and writing abilities have declined or remained stable while their listening and speaking abilities have improved. Teachers also reported that current students are more willing to listen to and speak in English than students were a decade ago. Teachers' perceptions of changes in grammar, reading, and listening are supported by hard data. In other words, most teachers accurately predicted changes in students' grammar, reading, and listening abilities. These accurate predictions may enhance the credibility of teachers' perceived changes in students' speaking and writing abilities, and attitudes. Instructional implications are discussed.

Key Words: language ability; grammar; reading; listening; speaking; writing; attitudes

1 Introduction

Twenty-five years ago when the author first started teaching Freshman English for Non-Majors (FENM) in Taiwan, he was impressed by students' vocabulary, reading ability, and grammatical knowledge. In fact, at that time it seemed that his students understood grammar rules better than their native English-speaking teacher. At the same time, over two decades ago students were initially shocked and befuddled by having a foreigner as their English teacher. Back then, students seemed to have made up their minds that they were not going to understand anything he said even before he opened his mouth. Getting students to speak was like pulling teeth.

Today, the picture is quite different. Nowadays, students' mouths do not drop open when he walks into the classroom for the first time. In the author's opinion, current FENM students' vocabulary, reading, and writing abilities are not on par with that of students of the past. On the other hand, he believes their listening and speaking abilities have improved and that current

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FENM students seem more willing to speak in English. Their speech may not be as accurate as that of students in the past, but they seem more fluent.

The possibility of changes in university students' language abilities noticed by the author brings several questions to mind. First, what might have caused these changes? Second, have other experienced teachers noticed any changes in students' English language abilities over the last decade and if they have, what changes can they report? Lastly, how accurate are teachers' perceptions of changes? This study will attempt to answer these questions. The answers to these questions will provide a clearer picture of the English language abilities of the current university student population in Taiwan.

2 Literature Review

It is important to first point out a caveat to this study. This study is exploratory in nature with the goal of identifying perceived changes in university freshmen's language ability. It is not the purpose of this study to specifically pinpoint which changes during the last two decades have had direct effects on the language performance of students, but rather to point out possible factors that may have contributed to shifts in language abilities.

Since each learner is unique, it is impossible to identify every individual difference and variable. However, over the last two decades some universal changes have occurred that may have affected the English language ability of incoming university students. These factors include, but are not limited to: 1) reforms to educational policies, 2) changes to teaching approaches, and 3) increased focus on aural and oral skills.

In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan initiated new educational policies and curriculum reforms in response to the need for communication skills in the global market (Butler, 2004; Nunan, 2003). The focus of these English educational reforms includes changes to: 1) the grade level at which English becomes a required subject, 2) teaching objectives and methods, and 3) teaching materials (Chang, 2008).

For several decades, English was not a compulsory subject in Taiwan until the seventh grade in junior high school. In 2001, English became a required subject starting in the fifth grade of elementary school. However, by 2005 formal English education was mandatory starting in the third grade of primary school. The earlier start to formal English education was not the only reform to Taiwan's English education policies. Under these new policies, there were also changes in teaching objectives and methods. According to Chang (2008), previous policies emphasized developing reading and writing skills for academic purposes, while the current curriculum "stresses the importance of cultivating communicative competence (i.e., primarily oral and listening skills but not neglecting reading and writing skills)" (p.424). Furthermore, under earlier policies the National Institute for Compilation and Translation provided a single series of

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textbooks and material for all schools and teachers to follow. However, new reforms have opened up the textbook market and, as a result, a variety of textbooks approved by the MOE are used today.

Two decades ago, a teacher-centered approach that focused on translation and grammar drills was the most common means of English teaching (Chen, 2002). However, today many teachers have adopted more learner-centered and communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches in an attempt to help their students to communicate effectively in real-life situations (Su, 2007). As a result many teachers have deemphasized accuracy and rote memorization and have tailored instruction to emphasize fluency through meaningful communication (Chang, 2004; Liu, 2002). By analyzing English test items of the college entrance exams over the past three decades, Yu (2006) highlighted the shifted from grammar translation methods to a more CLT approach in Taiwan.

There has been an increased focus on listening and speaking skills in Taiwan. Most elementary school English instruction focuses on developing students' listening and speaking abilities (Lai, 2008). Students currently entering university started their compulsory English education in elementary school, whereas freshmen a decade ago started their initial formal English education in junior high school with a focus on developing reading and writing skills. In addition, many schools have hired foreigners from native English-speaking countries in an effort to improve their students' listening and speaking skills (Su, 2006; Chang, 2008). Likewise, since the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE) did not test aural and oral skills, in the past they were not emphasized in formal instruction. However, currently many high schools and universities encourage their students to take standardized language exams such as the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) which have listening and oral sections. As a result, there has been an increased focus on listening and speaking skills in Taiwan. In the past, listening and speaking skills were not emphasized because they were not tested.

In addition to the possible factors presented above, there are numerous other ones. In fact, it is impossible to list every possible factor that may have influenced students' language ability over the last few years, but it is sufficient to conclude that over the last two decades, numerous changes have been made in formal English education in Taiwan, and as a result there may be changes in the language ability of university students. However, little or no research has been conducted to identify any possible changes in university students' language ability. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

2.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate possible changes in students' English language ability by means of a questionnaire administered to 18

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experienced English teachers who have taught the same level of FENM for at least 10 years. This paper will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's grammar ability, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's reading ability, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's listening ability, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?
4. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's speaking ability, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?
5. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's writing ability, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?
6. What are teachers' perceptions of changes in university freshmen's attitudes, as measured by a questionnaire administered to 18 experienced FENM teachers?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants are 18 full-time experienced FENM teachers (1 associate professor, 2 assistant professors, and 15 lecturers). All of the teachers have taught FENM at Tunghai University for at least 10 years and have advanced degrees in TESOL (or a related field) from universities in the United Kingdom or the United States. During freshman orientation all first-year students take the Tunghai English Placement Exam (TEPE). Based on the results of this exam, students are placed into one of 120 sections of FENM. The sections are divided into three levels: high, mid, and low, with approximately 30-35 students in each class. Four of the teachers in this study have generally taught high-level FENM classes, 10 of the teachers have mostly taught mid-level classes, and the remaining four teachers have typically taught low-level classes. This ratio of 4 high, 10 mid, and 4 low reflects the make-up of the total FENM population (Sims, 2008).

3.2 Instruments

The questionnaire in Appendix A was employed to gather data on teachers' perceptions of changes in students' language ability. This questionnaire is

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designed to measure six constructs or domains: changes in grammar, reading, listening, speaking, writing, and attitudes. The items for each construct are designed to match the specific goals and the grading policy for the FENM program at Tunghai University. Likewise, the items for the grammar, reading, and listening constructs are designed to match the test specifications (see Sims, 2006) of the TEPE. This was done so that the accuracy of teachers' perceptions can be gauged by comparing the data from the questionnaire with the results of the TEPE from the last 10 years. Lastly, the items in the domain of attitudes are designed to reveal the participants' perceptions of changes in students' attitudes towards reading, listening, speaking, grammar, and writing.

Following suggestions by Bachman (2005), Brown (2004), and Hugh (2003), three FENM teachers who were not directly involved in the production of the questionnaire conducted a content validity study of the questionnaire by comparing the questionnaire's content with its specifications and constructs. They concluded that the questionnaire was a valid measure of the desired constructs. Next, Cronbach's α was calculated to determine the internal reliability coefficient of the questionnaire items. The reliability coefficient of the each domain was .886 or higher (Grammar, .967; Reading, .950; Listening, .886; Speaking, .899; Writing, .936; Attitudes, .907). Based on these two procedures, the questionnaire was considered to have appropriate content validity and reliability.

3.3 Data collection

The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire during midterm exam week of the 2010 fall semester. Half a semester of four classroom hours per week allowed teachers sufficient time to develop perceptions of the language abilities of the students. Also, teachers were asked to recall their perceptions of students' language abilities over the last decade. Teachers had one week to complete the questionnaire. This gave teachers time to review their grade books, class records, or any other material from the last ten years that might help them to identify possible changes.

3.4 Data analysis

The main focus of the questionnaire was to collect data on teachers' perceptions of changes in university students' language abilities. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the mean, frequency, and standard deviation for each item. In an attempt to pinpoint any perceived changes, these descriptive statistics were also calculated for each level of FENM.

For the last ten years, incoming freshmen at Tunghai University took the TEPE during freshmen orientation (for the reliability and validity of the TEPE, as well as the correlation to the High-Intermediate GEPT see Sims,

2006). Analysis of year-by-year comparisons of mean scores of the TEPE for the last decade provides hard data for actual changes in freshmen's grammar, reading, and listening abilities. Comparison of these hard data with the results of the questionnaire will give some indication of the accuracy of teachers' perceptions.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall language ability

As presented in Table 1, eight (44.5%) out of the 18 teachers indicated that over the last decade the overall language ability of their freshmen has improved. Only three (16.7%) of the FENM teachers reported that their students' overall language ability has declined. More than a third (38.9%) of the teachers indicated no changes in freshmen's overall language ability. Three-quarters of the high-level teachers perceived a slight increase in their students' overall language ability, with one high-level teacher reporting no change. No high-level teachers felt that their students' overall language ability has declined over the last ten years. Half of the mid-level teachers reported no noticeable change in their students' overall language ability, while three out of ten teachers felt that it has improved; the remaining two mid-level teachers perceived a decline in their students' language ability. Half of the low-level teachers felt that their students' language ability has slightly improved. One low-level teacher reported no change and the other perceived a major decrease in her students' overall language ability.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Overall Language Ability

1. General overall language ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	1 (5.6%)	7 (38.9%)	7 (38.9%)	1 (5.6%)	2 (11.1%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	3	1	0	0	3.75	.50
Middle	1	2	5	1	1	3.10	1.10
Low	0	2	1	0	1	3.00	1.41

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Analysis of mean scores of the TEPE for the last ten years indicates few differences in total language scores over the last decade except for a significant increase in the last year (Sims and Lin, 2012). Quite simply, incoming freshmen's total TEPE scores did not vary from 2000 to 2009; however, there was a significant increase in 2010. Bearing in mind that the total score of the TEPE is composed of the scores for three sections: grammar (20%), reading (40%), and listening (40%), whereas the "overall language ability" question asked teachers to consider speaking and writing as well, the

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hard data from the TEPE does not conflict with the responses of the majority of teachers (83.4%) who perceived an increase or no change in the overall language ability of their students.

4.2 Grammar scores

Teachers' perceptions of changes in their students' grammar ability are presented in Table 2. More teachers (44.5%) believed that their FENM students' overall grammar ability has declined than teachers who felt that it has improved (22.2%). One third (33.3%) reported no noticeable change in students' overall grammar ability. Two high-level teachers felt that their students' grammar had slightly improved, while one teacher reported no change and the other noted a slight decline. Most mid-level teachers perceived a decline or no change in their students' overall grammar ability. No low-level teacher reported that their students' grammar ability had improved. Likewise, no teacher perceived a major increase in scores for any of the seven items on the grammar section of the questionnaire. No low-level teacher and only one mid-level teacher perceived any improvements in their students' grammar ability for any of the seven items. Only two teachers (one high-level and one mid-level) accounted for most of the reported slight improvements for all grammar items. As shown in Table 2, no teachers reported any improvements for item 6, and only one mid-level teacher reported a slight improvement for item 8. "No change" was the most frequent response for all individual grammar items for all levels.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Grammar

2. General overall grammar ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	6 (33.3%)	5 (27.8%)	3 (16.7%)	2.61	1.04
High	0	2	1	1	0	3.25	.96
Middle	0	2	3	2	3	2.40	1.17
Low	0	0	2	2	0	2.50	.58
3. Ability to use proper verb tense							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	9 (50.0%)	3 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	2.50	.99
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	0	1	4	2	3	2.30	1.06
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
4. Ability to use proper subject-verb agreement							
Total	0	3 (16.7%)	10 (55.6%)	2 (11.1%)	3 (16.7%)	2.72	.96
High	0	2	1	1	0	3.25	.96
Middle	0	1	6	1	2	2.60	.97
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
5. Ability to use count and non-count nouns							

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Total	0	2 (11.1%)	11 (61.1%)	2 (11.1%)	3 (16.7%)	2.67	.91
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	0	1	6	1	2	2.60	.97
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
6. Ability to use appropriate prepositions							
Total	0	0	11 (61.1%)	4 (22.2%)	3 (16.7%)	2.44	.78
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	0	5	3	2	2.30	.82
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
7. Ability to connect ideas (conjunctions/transitions)							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	11 (61.1%)	4 (22.2%)	1 (5.6%)	2.78	.73
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	0	1	6	2	1	2.70	.82
Low	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
8. Ability to use conditional sentences							
Total	0	1 (5.6%)	12 (66.7%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (11.1%)	2.67	.77
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	1	7	0	2	2.70	.95
Low	0	0	2	2	0	2.50	.58

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Teachers' perceptions about the decline or lack of change in students' grammar ability are consistent with the hard data from the TEPE, which revealed that students' total grammar scores gradually decreased from 2000 to 2005 and that this decline tapered off from 2006 to 2010. The results also indicated that students' scores on most items on the grammar section showed a tendency to decrease gradually from 1998 to 2005 and that there was no significant fluctuation in any of the grammar items from 2006 to 2010. In short, the hard data do not conflict with most teachers' perceptions of a decline or lack of change in students' grammar abilities over the last decade.

4.3 Reading scores

The teachers' perceptions of changes in students' reading ability are presented in Table 3. Half of the teachers believed that their FENM students' overall reading ability has declined while a third reported that it has slightly improved. Only three of the 18 teachers reported no noticeable change in their students' overall reading ability. For each level and item, there were more teachers who perceived a decline in their students' reading ability than teachers who reported an improvement. For the majority of reading items, "no change" was the most frequent response. No high-level teacher reported a major increase or a major decrease for any of the nine items. A majority of

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the mid-level teachers perceived there was no change for most of the reading items. However, the two mid-level teachers reported a major decline for items 9, 10, 11, 15, and 16. The same two mid-level teachers reported a slight decrease for the remaining items. In other words, two mid-level teachers accounted for most of the reported decline in reading items perceived by mid-level teachers. Similarly, one low-level teacher reported a major decline for items 10, 11, 16, and a slight decrease for the other items. This one low-level teacher accounted for most of the decline reported by low-level teachers.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Reading

9. General overall reading ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	0	6 (33.3%)	3 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	2 (11.1%)	3.2	.51
High	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96
Middle	0	4	1	3	2	2.70	1.25
Low	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96
10. Ability to identify or understand main ideas							
Total	1 (5.6%)	4 (22.2%)	7 (38.9%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (11.1%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96
Middle	1	2	4	1	2	2.90	1.29
Low	0	1	2	0	1	2.75	1.26
11. Ability to identify specific details							
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	10 (55.6%)	1 (5.6%)	3 (16.7%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	0	4	0	0	3.00	.00
Middle	0	4	3	1	2	2.90	1.20
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
12. Ability to reference pronouns							
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	10 (55.6%)	3 (16.7%)	0	3.22	1.06
High	0	1	3	0	0	3.25	.50
Middle	0	3	5	2	0	3.10	.74
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
13. Ability to determine the meaning of a word from context							
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	9 (50.0%)	5 (27.8%)	0	3.22	1.06
High	0	0	2	2	0	2.50	.58
Middle	0	3	5	2	0	3.10	.74
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
14. Ability to make inferences							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	11 (61.1%)	5 (27.8%)	0	3.22	1.06
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	2	5	3	0	2.90	.74
Low	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50

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15. Ability to read cursive text (handwriting style)							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	12 (66.7%)	2 (11.1%)	2 (11.1%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	1	7	0	2	2.70	.95
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
16. General vocabulary level							
Total	1 (5.6%)	5 (27.8%)	4 (22.2%)	5 (27.8%)	3 (16.7%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	2	1	1	0	3.25	.96
Middle	0	3	1	4	2	2.50	1.18
Low	1	0	2	0	1	3.00	1.63
17. General reading rate (speed)							
Total	0	3 (16.7%)	10 (55.6%)	5 (27.8%)	1 (5.6%)	3.22	1.06
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	3	4	2	1	2.90	1.00
Low	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Items 9 to 14 on the questionnaire were designed to match the reading test specifications of the TEPE in order to compare hard data with the perceptual data from this study. The reading scores for items 9 to 14 showed a tendency to decline or remain stable from 2000 to 2005, with the largest decline in reading for inference and vocabulary-in-context questions. From 2006 to 2010, reading scores for most items showed a tendency to remain stable with the only exception being higher scores for reading for inference items in 2008 and 2010. As was the case with the grammar scores, hard data from the TEPE were consistent with most teachers' perceptions of changes in students' reading abilities.

Items 15 to 17 were added to the study based on the classroom experience of the researcher. Over the last few years, he has noticed that many of his students were not able to read cursive text written on the board. Two-thirds of the teachers (53.3%) reported no change in students' ability to read cursive. An informal survey found that most of the teachers who reported "no change" rarely or never used cursive, while those who noticed a decline did write or used to write in cursive. Likewise, the researcher felt that students' general vocabulary level and reading rate were not on par with those of students a decade ago. In an attempt to find out if other experienced teachers had the same perceptions, the researcher added items 16 and 17 to the questionnaire. One-third of the teachers perceived that students' vocabulary level has improved, 22.2% reported no change, and 44.5% felt that it has declined. Most teachers (55.6%) felt that there was no change in students' reading rate, while a third of the teachers felt that it was slower than that of students in the past. The remainder (16.7%) felt that current students

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could read faster than students in the past. Since a majority of teachers perceived an improvement or no change in their students' general vocabulary level (55.6%) and reading rate (72.3%), the researcher's initial perceptions might not be accurate.

4.4 Listening scores

Two-thirds (66.7%) of all the teachers felt that students' overall listening ability has improved over the last ten years, while one-third (33.3%) reported no change in listening ability (*see* Table 4). It is important to note that no one perceived a decline in their student's overall listening ability. All high-level teachers reported an increase in their students' overall listening ability, with three-quarters of them perceiving a major increase. Six mid-level teachers reported a slight increase, while the remaining four reported no change. Half of the low-level teachers perceived an increase and the other half reported no change. In fact, only one mid-level teacher and one low-level teacher reported a decline in listening items. For all listening items, except items 22 and 25, most teachers reported an improvement. For items 22 and 25, "no change" was the most frequent response.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Listening

18. General overall listening ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	4 (22.2%)	8 (44.4%)	6 (33.3%)	0	0	3.89	.76
High	3	1	0	0	0	4.75	.50
Middle	0	6	4	0	0	3.60	.52
Low	1	1	2	0	0	3.75	.96
19. Ability to comprehend simple dialogues of a familiar nature							
Total	2 (11.1%)	11 (61.1%)	4 (22.2%)	1 (5.6%)	0	3.78	.73
High	1	3	0	0	0	4.25	.50
Middle	0	7	3	0	0	3.70	.48
Low	1	1	1	1	0	3.50	1.30
20. Ability to identify specific details from simple dialogues							
Total	0	11 (61.1%)	7 (38.9%)	0	0	3.61	.50
High	0	4	0	0	0	4.00	.00
Middle	0	6	4	0	0	3.60	.52
Low	0	1	3	0	0	3.25	.50
21. Ability to comprehend extended texts of a familiar nature							
Total	1 (5.6%)	8 (44.4%)	7 (38.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0	3.44	.78
High	1	2	1	0	0	4.00	.82
Middle	0	5	4	1	0	3.40	.70
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
22. Ability to identify specific details from extended texts							

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Total	1 (5.6%)	6 (33.3%)	9 (50.0%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	3.28	.90
High	1	2	1	0	0	4.00	.82
Middle	0	4	5	1	0	3.30	.68
Low	0	0	3	0	1	2.50	1.00
23. Ability to make an appropriate response based on what they have heard							
Total	1 (5.6%)	9 (50.0%)	7 (38.9%)	1 (5.6%)	0	3.56	.70
High	1	2	1	0	0	4.00	.81
Middle	0	4	6	0	0	3.40	.52
Low	0	3	0	1	0	3.50	1.00
24. Ability to understand English spoken at a normal rate							
Total	3 (5.6%)	9 (50.0%)	5 (38.9%)	0	1 (5.6%)	3.72	.96
High	2	2	0	0	0	4.50	.58
Middle	1	4	5	0	0	3.60	.70
Low	0	3	0	0	1	3.25	1.50
25. Ability to understand an academic lecture given in English							
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	12 (66.7%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	3.06	.73
High	0	2	2	0	0	3.50	.58
Middle	0	1	8	0	1	2.90	.74
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

The listening portion of the TEPE is composed of three sections: dialogue, story, and appropriate response. Item 18 on the questionnaire corresponds to the total listening scores of the TEPE. Unlike grammar and reading scores, total listening scores did not decline for any year during the last decade. In fact, from 2000 to 2010 total listening scores increased significantly from year to year (Sims and Lin, 2012). Two-thirds of the teachers accurately reported this increase in overall listening over the last decade. Items 19 and 20 correspond to the dialogue section of the TEPE, while items 21 and 22 match to the story section. Generally, listening scores for these items increased from 2000 to 2010. Once again, teachers were fairly accurate in their perceptions for these items. Item 23 corresponds to the appropriate response section of the TEPE. Unlike the scores for dialogue and story items, appropriate response scores did not fluctuate significantly during this period. For item 23, teachers' perceptions were not as accurate as they were for the other listening items. Items 24 and 25 do not correspond to any section in the TEPE, but were added to the questionnaire because the MOE is encouraging universities to offer classes in English in order to make schools in Taiwan more international. A majority of teachers (56.6%) believed that current students are better able to understand English spoken at a normal rate than students were in the past. In fact, an informal survey found that most teachers felt that they do not speak as slowly in class as they

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did 10 years ago. However, two-thirds of the teachers reported no change in students' ability to understand an academic lecture in English.

4.5 Speaking scores

Teachers' perceptions of changes in speaking are presented in Table 5. A large majority (77.8%) of teachers reported that FENM students' general overall speaking ability has improved over the last decade. Only two mid-level teachers reported no change, while one mid-level and one low-level teacher felt that their students' speaking ability had declined. All remaining teachers for each level perceived an improvement in their students' overall speaking ability.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Speaking

26. General overall speaking ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	5 (27.8%)	9 (50.0%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	3.89	1.08
High	2	2	0	0	0	4.50	.58
Middle	2	5	2	1	0	3.80	.92
Low	1	2	0	0	1	3.50	1.73
27. Pronunciation							
Total	3 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	4 (22.2%)	2 (11.1%)	2 (11.1%)	3.39	1.24
High	1	3	0	0	0	4.25	.50
Middle	2	3	2	2	1	3.30	1.34
Low	0	1	2	0	1	2.75	1.26
28. Fluency							
Total	3 (16.7%)	8 (44.4%)	5 (27.8%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	3.61	1.04
High	2	2	0	0	0	4.50	.58
Middle	1	5	3	1	0	3.60	.84
Low	0	1	2	0	1	2.75	1.26
29. Accuracy/grammar							
Total	0	4 (22.2%)	7 (38.9%)	3 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	2.61	1.09
High	0	2	1	1	0	3.25	.96
Middle	0	2	4	1	3	2.50	1.18
Low	0	0	2	1	1	2.25	.96
30. Range in vocabulary							
Total	1 (5.6%)	6 (33.3%)	5 (27.8%)	5 (27.8%)	1 (5.6%)	3.06	1.06
High	0	2	2	0	0	3.50	.58
Middle	0	4	2	3	1	2.90	1.10
Low	1	0	1	2	0	3.00	1.41
31. Effective word choice							
Total	1 (5.6%)	3 (16.7%)	8 (44.4%)	3 (16.7%)	3 (16.7%)	2.78	1.11

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High	1	1	2	0	0	3.75	.96
Middle	0	1	5	1	3	2.40	1.07
Low	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Items 27-31 were designed to match the oral specifics for the FENM program at Tunghai. Most teachers believed that their students' pronunciation (55.6%) and fluency (61.1%) were better than those of the past. Most high- and mid-level teachers reported improvements for both items. However, half of the low-level teachers reported no change in their students' pronunciation and fluency. Half of the high-level teachers perceived that their students' oral accuracy had improved, while 4 of the 10 mid-level teachers reported no change. No low-level teacher felt that their students' spoken grammar had improved. For both range in vocabulary and effective word choice, no high-level teacher reported a decline. For mid-level teachers, the results for range in vocabulary were equally split between improvements and declines. For effective word choice, one mid-level teacher reported improvement, while 3 reported a decline. Half of the low-level teachers felt their students' range of vocabulary and effective word choice had declined. In sum, the results of the questionnaire indicated that most teachers felt that current students' accuracy was not as high as that of past students, but current students seem more fluent.

4.6 Writing scores

Teachers' perceptions of changes in writing are presented in Table 6. One-third of the teachers (33.3%) believed that their students' overall writing ability has improved, while more than one-third (38.8%) reported a decline. The remainder (27.8%) reported there was no noticeable change.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Writing

32. General overall writing ability							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	0	6 (33.3%)	5 (27.8%)	5 (27.8%)	2 (11.1%)	2.83	1.04
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	0	3	3	3	1	2.80	1.03
Low	0	2	0	1	1	2.75	1.50
33. Ability to write grammatically correct sentences							
Total	0	3 (16.7%)	6 (33.3%)	5 (27.8%)	4 (22.2%)	2.44	1.04
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	0	2	2	3	3	2.30	1.16
Low	0	0	2	1	1	2.25	.96
34. Ability to write a well-structured essay							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	10 (55.6%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (22.2%)	2.56	.98

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High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	1	6	0	3	2.50	1.08
Low	0	1	1	1	1	2.50	1.29
35. Ability to write a well-organized paragraph							
Total	0	2 (11.1%)	11 (61.1%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (11.1%)	2.72	.83
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	1	6	2	1	2.70	.82
Low	0	1	2	0	1	2.75	1.26
36. Ability to write clear topic sentences							
Total	0	5 (27.8%)	10 (55.6%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)	3.06	.80
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	3	6	1	0	3.20	.63
Low	0	2	1	0	1	3.00	1.41
37. Ability to provide supporting details/information							
Total	0	5 (27.8%)	9 (50.0%)	4 (22.2%)	0	3.06	.73
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	0	2	6	2	0	3.00	.67
Low	0	3	0	1	0	3.50	1.00

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

Items 33-37 were designed to correspond to the writing specifics for the FENM program at Tunghai. “No noticeable change” was the most frequent response for all of the items under the writing domain of the questionnaire for high-level teachers. Similarly, for mid-level teachers “no change” was the most common response for all writing items except for the ability to write grammatically correct sentences (item 33). Most mid-level teachers felt students’ ability had declined for item 33. Low-level teachers were equally split between no change and a decline for this item. Unlike high and mid-level teachers, most low-level teachers believed that their current students were better able to write clear topic sentences (item 36) and to provide supporting details (item 37) than students were in the past.

4.7 Attitudes

Teachers perceived changes in students' attitudes are presented in Table 7. A majority of teachers reported that current students are more willing to use (item 38), listen to (item 41), and speak in (item 42) English than students were a decade ago. Likewise, most teachers believed that current freshmen are more comfortable with English being the language of instruction (item 45) than students were in the past. Nearly half of the teachers (8 of 18, 44.4%) felt that their students' willingness to study English (item 39) had not changed. “No change” was the most frequent response from mid-level teachers for students’ willingness to study/learn English (item 39), read in English (item

40), and practice English grammar (item 43). Few teachers reported any improvement in students' willingness to write in English (item 44).

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes

38. Willingness to use English							
	MI	SI	NC	SD	MD	M	SD
Total	5 (27.8%)	5 (27.8%)	7 (38.9%)	0	1 (5.6%)	3.72	1.07
High	1	3	0	0	0	4.25	.50
Middle	2	2	6	0	0	3.60	.84
Low	2	0	1	0	1	3.50	1.91
39. Willingness to study/learn English							
Total	3 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	8 (44.4%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)	3.33	1.08
High	0	3	1	0	0	3.75	.50
Middle	1	1	6	2	0	3.10	.88
Low	2	0	1	0	1	3.50	1.91
40. Willingness to read in English							
Total	2 (11.1%)	3 (16.7%)	10 (55.6%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)	3.17	.99
High	0	2	1	1	0	3.25	.96
Middle	1	1	7	1	0	3.20	.79
Low	1	0	2	0	1	3.00	1.63
41. Willingness to listen to English							
Total	3 (16.7%)	8 (44.4%)	6 (33.3%)	1 (5.6%)	0	3.72	.83
High	1	3	0	0	0	4.25	.50
Middle	1	4	5	0	0	3.60	.70
Low	1	1	1	1	0	3.50	1.29
42. Willingness to speak in English							
Total	4 (22.2%)	9 (50.0%)	4 (22.2%)	1 (5.6%)	0	3.89	.83
High	1	3	0	0	0	4.25	.50
Middle	2	5	3	0	0	3.90	.74
Low	1	1	1	1	0	3.50	1.29
43. Willingness to practice English grammar							
Total	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)	11 (61.1%)	4 (22.2%)	1 (5.6%)	2.83	.86
High	0	0	3	1	0	2.75	.50
Middle	1	0	7	1	1	2.90	1.00
Low	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96
44. Willingness to write in English							
Total	1 (5.6%)	3 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	7 (38.9%)	0	2.89	.90
High	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82
Middle	1	1	4	4	0	2.90	1.00
Low	0	1	1	2	0	2.75	.96
45. Comfort with English being the language of instruction							
Total	2	10	5	1 (5.6%)	0	3.72	.75

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	(11.1%)	(55.6%)	(27.8%)				
High	0	4	0	0	0	4.00	.00
Middle	2	5	3	0	0	3.90	.74
Low	0	1	2	1	0	3.00	.82

Note. MI=major increase; SI=slight increase; NC=no change; SD=slight decrease; MD=major decrease; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

5 Conclusion

Over the last decade, there have been numerous changes to English learning in Taiwan. Not surprisingly, during this period university teachers have perceived changes in their students' language ability. A majority of teachers felt that their current students' listening and speaking abilities are better than those of ten years ago. In fact, no teacher reported a decline in their students' listening ability and only two teachers reported a decline in their students' speaking ability. Likewise, most teachers reported that current students are more willing to listen to and speak in English than students were a decade ago. These results indicate that the efforts to improve students' listening and speaking skills in Taiwan may be paying dividends.

The results of the questionnaire also indicate that a majority of teachers perceived that their students' reading, grammar, and writing abilities have declined or remained unchanged. Hard data from the TEPE reveal that students' grammar and reading abilities initially declined from 2000 to 2005 and that this decline tapered off from 2006 to 2010. These data also support teachers' perceived improvements in their students' listening ability. In short, hard data from the TEPE does not conflict with a majority of the teachers' perceptions of changes in listening, grammar, and reading.

At the beginning of this study, the researcher believed that current FENM students' grammar, reading, and writing abilities were much lower than those of students a decade ago. The results of this study indicate that student's abilities in these domains may have declined, but not nearly to the extent the researcher had expected. On another positive note, based on the results of the TEPE, the initial trends toward decline appear to have tapered off during the last five years.

Teachers need to be aware that their students' language ability might have changed and should modify instruction and assessment accordingly. For example, due to improvements in students' listening skills, the university where this study took place no longer requires all students to attend listening lab classes. Last year, all FENM classes were 5 hours per week, including one hour in the listening lab. Currently, only students in low-level classes are required to attend the listening lab. Likewise, the FENM program revised the listening section of its exams. Portions of the listening exams used to be played twice; currently, all listening items are only heard once.

The reader should bear in mind the following limitations. This study

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only investigated perceived changes in the language ability of freshmen at a single university and similar studies at other universities are needed to verify the results. Second, this study asked teachers to indicate their perceptions about changes in students' language abilities. Perceptual data are subjective by nature. However, efforts were made to support these subjective data with objective data from the TEPE. Third, this study did not explore possible changes in affective and cognitive factors. Quite simply, freshmen have evolved, not only in terms of language ability, but also in terms of their interests, motivations, expectations, professionalism and demeanor. Future quantitative and qualitative studies can explore these and other factors.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire of Perceptions of Changes in Freshmen’s English Language Abilities

Name: _____
Number of years teaching at Tunghai: _____

Which level of FENM have you mostly taught at Tunghai (please circle one below)?

High Mid Low

This study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of possible changes in the language ability of incoming university freshmen over the last decade. All your responses should be based on your professional opinion and experience teaching **at the level indicated above.**

Please refer to the scale below and then check A, B, C, D, or E for each of the following statements.

- A = Major improvement or increase
- B = Slight improvement or increase
- C = No noticeable change
- D = Slight decrease or decline
- E = Major decrease or decline

Over the last decade, has there been any perceived change in FENM students’ overall language ability in the following areas?

Overall Language ability	A	B	C	D	E
1. General overall language ability					

Grammar	A	B	C	D	E
2. General overall grammar ability					
3. Ability to use proper verb tense					
4. Ability to use proper subject-verb agreement					
5. Ability to use count and non-count nouns					
6. Ability to use appropriate prepositions					
7. Ability to connect ideas (conjunctions/transitions)					
8. Ability to use conditional sentences					

Reading	A	B	C	D	E
9. General overall reading ability					
10. Ability to identify or understand main ideas					

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11. Ability to identify specific details					
12. Ability to reference pronouns					
13. Ability to determine the meaning of a word from context					
14. Ability to make inferences					
15. Ability to read cursive text (handwriting style)					
16. General vocabulary level					
17. General reading rate (speed)					

Listening	A	B	C	D	E
18. General overall listening ability					
19. Ability to comprehend simple dialogues of a familiar nature					
20. Ability to identify specific details from simple dialogues					
21. Ability to comprehend extended texts (stories) of a familiar nature					
22. Ability to identify specific details from extended texts					
23. Ability to make an appropriate response based on what they have heard					
24. Ability to understand English spoken at a normal rate					
25. Ability to understand an academic lecture given in English					

Speaking	A	B	C	D	E
26. General overall speaking ability					
27. Pronunciation					
28. Fluency					
29. Accuracy/grammar					
30. Range in vocabulary					
31. Effective word choice					

Writing	A	B	C	D	E
32. General overall writing ability					
33. Ability to write grammatically correct sentences					
34. Ability to write a well-structured essay					
35. Ability to write a well-organized paragraph					
36. Ability to write clear topic sentences					
37. Ability to provide supporting details/information					

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Attitudes	A	B	C	D	E
38. Willingness to use English					
39. Willingness to study/learn English					
40. Willingness to read in English					
41. Willingness to listen to English					
42. Willingness to speak in English					
43. Willingness to practice English grammar					
44. Willingness to write in English					
45. Comfort with English being the language of instruction					