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EDITORIAL

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This special issue is about English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) assessment in Taiwan, an oceanic nation located off the southeastern coast of mainland China. Taiwan is a small country with a complex history, linguistic background, and socio-political situation, all of which are related to the important role that English plays in Taiwan today. Thus, some background information about Taiwan is provided here so that the international readership can obtain a better understanding of the rationale behind the articles presented in this issue.

Taiwan, or the Republic of China, comprises the main island of Taiwan and the archipelagoes of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, along with a number of small islands. First settled by Austronesian people thousands of years ago, the main island of Taiwan was believed to be mentioned in ancient Chinese history as early as the 3rd century and referred to as “Ilha Formosa” by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Throughout its history, Taiwan has been governed by many groups of settlers, namely, the Dutch in the 17th century, the Chinese through Koxinga and the Qing Dynasty from the 17th century to the 19th century, the Japanese at the end of 19th century up until the 1940s, and back to the Chinese again after the Nationalist Party (“Kuomingtang”) moved from mainland China to Taiwan in the 1940s. By 2010, of the population of 23 million in Taiwan, 95% are Han Chinese, with a small percentage of Taiwanese aboriginals remaining (The Republic of China Yearbook, 2010). In recent years, the Taiwanese population has also included immigrants from different countries, especially South East Asians who come to marry Taiwanese citizens or for job opportunities. Within the larger group of Han Chinese, the majority speak Southern Min (also known as “Taiwanese Hokkien,” or “Hoklo”), whereas the rest speak Hakka and other Chinese dialects. For all Taiwanese, Mandarin, referred to as “guoyu” (literally meaning “national language”), has been the official language since the Nationalist government took control. It is used at every level of education and as lingua franca among the various linguistic groups in Taiwan.

In the decades following World War II, Taiwan’s rapid economic growth has transformed it into an industrialized developed country and one of the “Four Asian Tigers” (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan). Ever since the “Taiwan Miracle” in the 1980s, the Taiwanese advanced technology industry has played a key role in the global economy, because a large portion of the world’s consumer electronics parts are made by Taiwanese companies. As a result, it is not surprising to see that more and more young Taiwanese put serious effort into
mastering the world’s language—English—in their attempt to obtain better education and job opportunities. Although Mandarin is seen as the lingua franca within Taiwan, English is seen as the major tool that Taiwanese can use to connect to the rest of the world. Although other foreign languages such as Japanese, Korean, French, German, and Spanish are also taught in Taiwanese colleges, English is undoubtedly the most important foreign language of all. For decades, EFL has been a required subject for Taiwanese students in junior and senior high schools and a significant subject of the high school and university entrance examinations. In 2005, Taiwan’s Ministry of Education (MOE) made English compulsory from third grade in elementary school, but many schools in major cities have chosen to start English as early as first grade. Parents with adequate financial means can choose to give their children more exposure to English at an even earlier age, thanks to an abundance of EFL programs for children, bilingual preschools and kindergartens, and English-speaking tutors. But despite this general enthusiasm toward English, formal instruction in Taiwanese elementary, junior high, and senior high schools tend to focus more on reading and writing, grammar, and vocabulary rather than communicative language ability due to large class size, pressures from examinations, and teaching personnel issues.

In support of English learning, the MOE commissioned the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) to develop the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), a five-proficiency-level, criterion-referenced test that is designed to assess Taiwanese EFL learners from all walks of life. As the most important locally made standardized EFL test in Taiwan, the GEPT has spawned much research within the country ever since its first introduction in 2000. Although most of the GEPT-related research is conducted by LTTC researchers for the domestic audience, with few articles being published in international journals (such as Weir & Wu, 2006; Wu, 2008), non-LTTC researchers have published at least three international journal articles (Shih, 2007, 2010; Tian, 2006), and written at least three Ph.D. dissertations about the GEPT (Liao, 2009; Pu, 2008; Shih, 2006). Reviews of the GEPT have also been published in both Language Testing (Roever & Pan, 2008) and Language Assessment Quarterly (Shih, 2008), and two book chapters have been written specifically about the test (Kunnan & Wu, 2010; Vongpumivitch, 2010). Thus, it is fair to say that in almost all conversations about EFL assessment in Taiwan, the word “GEPT” has to be mentioned.

One of the reasons the GEPT is such an important topic in the world of EFL assessment in Taiwan is that, just like in many Asian countries, Taiwan is a “test-centered” society. As Ross (2008) wrote, “language assessment results [in Asia] are associated with access to upward social mobility” (p. 5), EFL tests in Taiwan are used as “gate-keeping devices for access to general employment, higher education, and the professions [which] lead to a sense of competition pervading all levels of education” (Ross, 2008, p. 5). The GEPT is not the only important test in Taiwan; international tests such as the Educational Testing Service’s Test of English as a Foreign Language, Test of English for International Communication, and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examination’s International English Language Testing System are also important. Young learners in Taiwan are also introduced to other tests such as those offered by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examination like the Young Learners English Test, the Key English Test, and the Preliminary English Test, to name a few. In fact, J. F. Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) argued that tests are “the Chinese Imperative,” as Taiwanese learners learn English because they are required by tests rather than because of their integrative motivation. Their findings echo the belief of many teachers, parents, and students, which is that students will study if there is a test; if there is no test, students will not study at all.
For most Taiwanese students, tests are used for summative purposes rather than formative ones. Students are used to being judged by midterm and final test grades, having their future decided by large-scale standardized tests, and putting much effort into preparing themselves to do well in tests. Alternatives in assessment that are geared toward formative purposes, such as the use of portfolios, journals, video- and audio-tapes, teachers’ observations, and self- and peer-assessments, may be used in university classrooms but are less common in junior and senior high schools where teachers have to worry about preparing students for large-scale standardized tests under severe time pressure. Diagnostic EFL testing aiming to provide students with helpful information about their strengths and weaknesses is also a relatively new concept in Taiwan. To date, only one article about diagnostic assessment has been published in an international journal (C.-F. Chen & Cheng, 2008).

The four articles in this special issue on EFL assessment in Taiwan address some of the issues just discussed, with Wu’s and Vongpumivitch’s articles focusing on the GEPT; Huang’s examining the role that classroom assessment have on motivation; and Yin, Sims, and Cothran’s reporting on students’ reactions to feedback provided by an online diagnostic grammar test. Although these topics are highly relevant to the Taiwanese context, they should be of interest to the international readership as well, as the GEPT has now expanded its market to other countries such as Vietnam (Kunnan & Wu, 2010), and diagnostic EFL testing is receiving increasing attention around the world (Alderson, 2005a). The use of tests as a tool to motivate desired EFL-learning behaviors should also be relevant to many Asian regions/countries that share the similar test-oriented atmosphere as Taiwan, such as China, Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan (see Cheng, 2008; Choi, 2008; Qian, 2008; Sasaki, 2008).

Marking the 10th-year anniversary of the GEPT, Wu’s article gives an overview of the test and reviews GEPT-related research from the perspective of the GEPT’s creator—the LTTC. Although most large-scale standardized tests in Taiwan, such as the university entrance exam, do not have listening and speaking sections, the GEPT revolutionized EFL testing in Taiwan with its inclusion of those two sections in all of its five levels. As Wu explains, this effort has been well supported by the Taiwanese educational community as teachers and learners understand the need for an assessment of oral skills. Wu’s article outlines validation efforts made by the LTTC during the past 10 years, reviews studies conducted by both the LTTC researchers and non-LTTC researchers, and lists a range of influences that the GEPT has on EFL learning and teaching in Taiwan. Some of the influences are still controversial today, such as the use of the GEPT by many colleges and universities as one of the graduation requirements, and the need to map the GEPT to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Although Wu states that the Taiwanese MOE has adopted the CEFR as a means to establish a common standard of English proficiency, the rationale behind this policy is unclear. It can be expected that in the future there will be more studies such as Wu and Wu (2010, cited in Wu’s article), which demonstrates that the Elementary to Advanced levels of GEPT correspond to the CEFR A2 to C1 levels. However, questions still remain about the necessity or appropriateness of mapping an EFL test made for Taiwanese to the CEFR at all. The extent to which the Taiwanese consumers understand the CEFR is also questionable. After all, the CEFR does not only consist of the six labels for proficiency levels ranging from A1 to C2 (see Alderson, 2005b; Morrow, 2004). Many aspects of the CEFR, like the idea of lifelong learning, learning passport, and multicomponential can-do statements, have not yet been adopted or well understood in the Taiwanese EFL learning community, and it remains to be
seen whether the CEFR will be better understood by the Taiwanese educational context as time goes by.

In Wu’s article, it is stated that one of the goals of the GEPT is to promote lifelong learning among Taiwanese citizens. To follow up on this issue, Vongpumivitch investigated the extent to which GEPT test takers perceived the test as being successful in meeting three goals: improving the test takers’ English, motivating English learning, and promoting lifelong learning. Through questionnaires, student and nonstudent GEPT test takers reported that although they tended to agree that the GEPT has improved their English proficiency, they were divided when asked whether the GEPT was successful in motivating them to learn English. Most participants did not feel that the GEPT was successful in promoting lifelong English learning. It seems that the strength of the GEPT is in its assessment of all four skills, a sentiment that confirms Wu’s (this issue) findings. However, the GEPT seems to have only a short-term push for motivation because most test takers take the GEPT for specific real-world needs or out of necessity. Once those needs are met, the importance of the GEPT seems to decrease in the test takers’ minds. Furthermore, statistical analysis revealed that the positive attitudes that the test takers had toward the GEPT had the strongest influence on their evaluation of the GEPT’s success in reaching its goals. The results of this study revealed that although it is widely acknowledged that tests pressure people and have negative effects on motivation to learn, the majority of the GEPT test takers still think that Taiwan needs the GEPT tests. To many GEPT test takers in this study, the GEPT is both a standardized test and a self-assessment tool, which shows a special role of the GEPT in the Taiwanese society. This also shows that Taiwanese EFL learners have strong trust in the LTTC to declare how well they are doing in terms of their English language proficiency. They also seemed to be accustomed to relying on tests to motivate them to learn. However, this reliance on tests for feedback and motivation may not be enough to promote lifelong learning of English among GEPT test takers.

Whereas Vongpumivitch examined the relationship between tests and motivation in light of the GEPT, Huang examined the issue from a classroom assessment perspective. Accepting that Taiwan is a “test-driven” society, Huang interviewed six college EFL teachers to see the extent to which they try to motivate their students through tests and grades. At the same time, she used questionnaires to examine how students think about the use of tests and grades to motivate them. She found that the teachers designed exams carefully so that not only do exams account for the majority of the grades but students have to put significant effort into preparing for the exams. At the same time, teachers also used nontest grades to guide students toward desired learning behaviors, such as increased class participation. On the other hand, although students seemed to think that tests demotivate, after analyzing their written responses, Huang found contradictory results. Although students seemed to be against tests, they acknowledged the necessity and effectiveness of tests as the motivator, provided that the teacher’s requirement is reasonable to them. Still, the extent to which they would be motivated depends on a cost–benefit analysis, as students would spend more time on the courses that have upcoming tests rather than the ones that do not. With students’ opinions in mind, Huang concluded that teachers should optimize their use of tests so that tests will properly motivate students; at the same time, teachers should be careful not to push students too hard with tests and grades so that students will not feel demotivated as a result.

Perhaps one of the reasons why students view tests with such ambivalence is because in their minds, tests are used to “judge” how good they are instead of helping them learn better.
To improve this mindset, use of diagnostic testing that provides feedback to test takers may help students feel that tests are more useful to their attempt to learn English. Having developed an online multiple-choice diagnostic English grammar test for self-assessment purposes, Yin, Sims, and Cothran report the reactions that students at a Taiwanese university have toward the feedback from this test. In each item, the student could see his or her own response, the correct answer highlighted, and both English and Chinese explanations of the answer, as well as the corresponding grammar rule. From student questionnaires completed after finishing the test, Yin et al. found that both high-scoring and low-scoring students found the item-based feedback to be fairly useful, especially if the explanations were sufficiently detailed and if they could see examples of correct usage. A follow-up interview with a small group of students who did not complete the questionnaire revealed that students preferred explanations that confirmed their previous knowledge, clarified an educated guess, or taught them new knowledge. On the other hand, students did not like feedback that was too short or contained metalinguistic terms that they did not understand. Because Yin et al. also found that the desired characteristics of feedback had low correlations with item difficulty, the findings should be very helpful for diagnostic test developers. At the end of the article, Yin et al. provide practical recommendations for improving diagnostic test construction and evaluation, discuss the relevance of test takers’ cultural background for diagnostic language testing, and evaluate the role of feedback as evidence of a diagnostic-test items’ construct validity. Because diagnostic test development projects are not frequently reported in Taiwan, Yin et al.’s article makes an important contribution not only because of its findings but because of its detailed account of test development and data collection methodology.

The four articles in this special issue by no means represent all research that language-assessment researchers conducted in Taiwan. For a better understanding of EFL assessment in Taiwan, the appendix provides a list of Taiwanese researchers whose language-assessment-related works are available to an international audience. This list, of course, is not exhaustive, because it relies on information available on each professor’s website.

The list in the appendix also does not include works published in Taiwanese journals or those that are published in domestic TEFL conference proceedings—the two most popular means of disseminating knowledge for many Taiwanese researchers. It is hoped that this special issue not only brings interesting insights from Taiwan to the international readership but also inspires more Taiwanese researchers to publish their works in international journals so that their research can be accessed by a wider audience.

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Guest Editor

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