

A Comparison Study of Buxiban Learning in Hong Kong and Taiwan

Lisa Hsu*, Wendy Yang

National Taichung University of Science and Technology, Taichung City, Taiwan

*Corresponding author: lisahsu@gm.nutc.edu.tw

Received August 02, 2018; Revised September 05, 2018 Accepted September 12, 2018

Abstract The study aimed to explore students' perspective and reasons for going to a Buxiban, and whether their English ability improved after attending a Buxiban. Buxibans, also known as cram schools, provide extra help to enhance the four skills needed to learn English. English as a subject is treated as an essential course when taking the college entrance examination for both Hong Kong and Taiwan students. It is common for students to seek additional help from a Buxiban. This study also tried to investigate the differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong Buxiban's learning culture. Three hundred and ten high school students participated in this study. Four research questions were posed to understand students in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as their intention of attending a Buxiban and their evaluation after attending a Buxiban. A questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study; it contained 25 questions. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of this questionnaire in this study was .731. The descriptive statistics and t-test were computed. The result showed that students from both places had slightly different reasons for going to a Buxiban. They enjoyed Buxiban's "varied teaching methods," but "teacher appearance" was more important to Hong Kong students. Next, they never attended a Buxiban just for "killing time" but appreciated the "various resources" provided by them and aimed for a higher English score. Also, Taiwan students indicated they learned "vocabulary" more in a Buxiban whereas Hong Kong students learned more "grammar." Fifty-three percent of Taiwan students perceived that a Buxiban helped them improve their English ability while 44% of Hong Kong students indicated they were helped. Furthermore, 65% of Hong Kong students stated that they expected to continue studying in a Buxiban but only 24% of Taiwan students would be willing to do so. At the end of this study, more pedagogical suggestions, future suggestions, and limitations of this study are discussed.

Keywords: Buxiban, Taiwan, Hong Kong, English learning

Cite This Article: Lisa Hsu, and Wendy Yang, "A Comparison Study of Buxiban Learning in Hong Kong and Taiwan." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 6, no. 9 (2018): 1257-1263. doi: 10.12691/education-6-9-3.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Buxibans that provides test-preparation programs have increased in recent years, especially for Asian students. Due to the pressure of entering a good university, many of them choose to go to a Buxiban after school. According to the Ministry of Education [1,2], from 2004 to 2013, the number of Buxibans in Taiwan has increased by 55%. This phenomenon is also seen in many Asian countries as well, such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong [3]. Both for students in Hong Kong and Taiwan, having good results in public examinations could lead to more chances to get a better education, ultimately resulted in a better career [4,5]. According to Chen and Fan's [6] research, as a test-oriented nation, people study very hard to obtain good grades. Most students have experience of going to a Buxiban in their different stages of study. Among all kinds of Buxibans, the authors chose to focus on English

Buxibans. Since parents usually have a high expectation on children's future competition and are concerned about their children lagging far behind others, many will take their children to an English Buxiban at an early age. However, whether students' English grades really improve after attending an English Buxiban is unproven, although Liu's [5] study discovered students did improve their English after attending a Buxiban. However, this study did not examine which skill particularly improved neither their perspective of joining a Buxiban. Did listening, speaking, writing, or reading improve? Another focus of this study was to investigate the main reason for students going to a Buxiban in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Lastly, this study attempted to discover any teaching/learning differences at a Buxiban between Taiwan and Hong Kong.

1.2. Buxiban verses Cram School

A Buxiban contains three features. First, it is purely academically oriented. Second, it strives to help students get a higher score. Third, it operates outside of the classroom, providing tutorial services after school [3,7].

The word “cram” means that a group of students stay at a place with help from tutors who teach students tests skills for getting a better score [3]. Cram schools often follow the mainstream education system requirements [8]. At most chain Buxibans, the tutors will work on improving students’ comprehension by stressing memorization and constantly taking practice tests. When people use the term of Buxiban or cram school, it actually refers to the same concept of helping students’ learning.

1.3. English Buxiban

The word “Buxiban” is a common term used in Mandarin speaking countries. The English Buxiban is seen as any private language school that gives help for people who need English language instruction [9].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Buxiban Booming Effect

The phenomenon of studying in a Buxiban is a trend both in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Although it is part of the education industry, it is run more like the service industry. A Buxiban tries its best to build up a good reputation and image in order to attract customers and bring in greater profits [10]. Huang [4] indicated that Buxibans are now commercialized in Hong Kong. A Buxiban spends a lot of money to advertise their famous teachers’ profiles on buses, posters or on billboards along highways. Lin and Chen [11] stated five important evaluation indicators that influence parents’ decision about selecting the best Buxiban for their children. They are: teacher’s professional teaching skills, counseling systems, various courses, convenient locations with great facilities, and a Buxiban’s reputation. From an Asia perspective, people still strongly believe if a person has good English proficiency he or she might get more chances to receive higher education and even later have better job opportunities. Because Asian students do not have a total comprehensive English environment, they have fewer chances to improve their English skills. Most English Buxibans hire native English speakers to attract students who long to practice speaking. Therefore, it has become necessary for English Buxibans to hire native English speakers. This phenomenon has been growing radically [12].

Huang, Wu, and Zhao [13] pointed out that one significant factor that has caused the increase in the number of Buxibans was changes within the education system. According to the Taiwan Ministry of Education [1], beginning August 1st, 2014, 9-year national compulsory education was changed to 12-year. Also, the government had changed the style of examination from a *basic skills test* to a *comprehensive assessment test* for junior high school students [14]. In this new policy, traditional assessment was also made less stressful. Before students were evaluated by giving a number score, whereas the new policy labels students’ performance in three levels—mature, basic, and still needs improvement—to evaluate students’ learning outcome. The purpose was to reduce the heavy schooling burden for students. However, whether students’ learning pressure has been decreased or not is

still questionable. As a matter of fact, those junior high students encountered another bigger and tougher challenge. If they want to go to prestigious senior high schools or universities, they must demonstrate high-level achievement at school. Furthermore, English is an examination subject that is divided into reading skills and listening skills. Listening skills are rarely taught or learned in formal school English classes, therefore, students who want to pass the entrance exam and be able to go to prestigious schools must get a better English score [15]. It is fair to conclude this change of the educational examination system brings pressure for all students, and further encourages them to go to a Buxiban to get more input about English.

In 2009, Hong Kong changed its educational system into 3-3-4, including 3 years in junior high, 3 years in senior high and 4 years in university. More importantly, this policy changed from taking two public exams into one only. Because there was a lack of practice test papers after the changes were made, Buxibans targeted the problem and lured students to attend their courses [16]. Therefore, one reason for Hong Kong students to go to a Buxiban was because they wanted to take more practical tests so they could be confident when taking the actual entrance exams.

Wei et al. [16] also stated that the amount of degree programs never fit the society’s need. Therefore, this brings a competitive learning environment. Just simply getting a pass-score would not help them to enter high-status schools. Moreover, according to Chao and Chen (2015) in research they carried out on Hong Kong College students, 72% of interviewees were still going to a Buxiban. The fact is clear that the education system change, in both Taiwan and Hong Kong, caused students to have the need to go to Buxibans if they want to do well on entrance examinations.

2.2. Culture of Taiwan Buxiban

In Taiwan, going to Buxibans has become a social phenomenon [17]. Although it is part of the educational industry, the way they run is pretty much like a service industry. Buxibans will try their best to build up a good reputation and develop a great image in order to attract more students who are considered their customers, in the end, their profits gradually increased [10]. This explains why Buxibans are booming even though the birth rate is low and economy is down. In addition, in order to help students to get better scores, Buxibans’ teachers focused on grammar and the quantity of vocabulary while teaching [18]. Students are told to have a good English ability to read because the information on the Internet, such as literature and academic reports are all written in English [19]. Besides, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has launched some policies in the year 2001 that intended to help students increase their competitiveness by building their English abilities. Therefore, children seem to have no option but to join Buxibans to advance their English levels [20].

2.3. Culture of Hong Kong Buxiban

While looking at the phenomenon of Buxibans in Hong Kong, it seems reasonable to accept that Hong Kong

Buxibans fill a market need. Students who go to Buxibans are aiming to go on to higher education. According to Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, more than 50% of interviewed students have attended Buxibans before [16]. This is caused by the changes in the education system in Hong Kong, thus, students need to have higher grades than their peers to enter a national university. That explains why going to a Buxiban has become a trend in Hong Kong. Huang [4] stated Buxibans in Hong Kong are now commercialized. Buxibans spend a lot of money to advertise their model teachers' pictures and advisement posters on buses. Students also talk about which teachers are more popular and will change a Buxiban to one with a higher reputation. However, as the number of Buxiban teachers increase in society, Buxibans need to present a lot more great famous teachers in order to compete and gain students' attention, which also helps them to compete with other Buxibans. As a result, teachers from Buxibans are presented like "a savior" of students. What is more, a nice and neat appearance with a high educational background is very important for teachers who are teaching in Hong Kong Buxibans [21].

2.4. Causes for Students Joining Buxiban

For those students who go to Buxibans, parents play an important role since they support children financially [22,23]. According to those parents, the reason they are willing to support their children to go to Buxibans is that English is an international language. Therefore, parents think if children can learn English well, they may become more competitive in this globalized world [24,25]. Moreover, parents are concerned their children's grades will fall behind others, so they put their children in Buxibans as young as possible [26]. Another reason is to achieve a higher educational performance or to achieve better English scores on entrance exams. This is a top priority both in Taiwan and Hong Kong. [15]. However, since some students cannot meet the satisfactory benchmark by simply studying in schools, an option is to go to a Buxiban. The majority of students believe Buxibans' teachers have the ability to help them improve their academic performance and increasing their test scores [27,28]. According to Liu's study [5], Buxibans did help students improve their English ability. Chen and Lu [29] also mentioned in their research that students achieve better grades if they spent more time studying after school. In order for Taiwan students to pass examinations, the teaching focuses on the meaning of vocabulary and on grammar [18]. Did students really improve cognitively and improve as expected? This needs further study. Also which particular areas showed student improvement remains to be discovered through further examination. Based upon the rational from the review of literature, the following research questions are posed for this study:

1. What factors affect students when choosing English Buxibans?
2. What are the reasons students go to an English Buxiban?
3. Which skills do students think they improved the most after attending English Buxibans?
4. Does the perception of English learning at a Buxiban differ between Taiwanese and Hong Kong students?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Three hundred and ten high school students participated in this study. One hundred sixty participants were Taiwanese whereas 150 participants were Hong Kongnese. The grade of the participants was as follows: 79 students making up 25% were in grade 1, 96 students making up 31% were in grade 2, and 135 students making up 44% were in grade 3. Duration of Buxiban attendance varied from less than one year, one to two years, three to six years, and more than six years. Among these participants, 53 students studied in a Buxiban for less than one year, 62 students studied one to two years, 114 students attended Buxibans for three to six years, and 81 students had gone to a Buxiban for more than six years. Table 1 presents the details.

Table 1. Participants and Duration of Attending a Buxiban in Taiwan and Hong Kong

Participants	Numbers and Percentage
Taiwan	160 (51.6%)
Hong Kong	150 (48.4%)
Grade 1	79 (25%)
Grade 2	96 (31%)
Grade 3	135 (44%)
Duration of attending a Buxiban	
Less than 1 year	53 (17%)
1-2 years	62 (20%)
3-6 years	114 (37%)
More than 6 years	81 (26%)

3.2. Instrument

This study was conducted quantitatively. In order to examine the research questions posed, descriptive statistic and t-test were computed to answer the questions. The questionnaire included 4-background information questions and 21 questions that were established for the purpose of this study. Validity criteria used in this study was content validity; strengthened by preparing items in reference to the related literature review, and by consulting with a couple of experts in this area. A pilot study was provided before giving the actual survey. The advisor provided some advice and suggestions to strengthen the validity. Meanwhile, two questions were revised, for example, in Question 1, the sentence of "the image of the company" was changed into "the reputation of the Buxiban." Question 8 was modified by giving some examples. The original version was that, "I think Buxibans provide an abundant of materials," and was changed to "I think Buxibans provide abundant materials, such as teachers, hardware, and so on." Cronbach's alpha reliability was .731 that is considered reliable, as Linn [30] stated reliability coefficient should reach .7. Therefore, both validity and reliability are considered acceptable.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was designed and modified over nearly a month. After the final version of the questionnaire was completed, a pilot study was conducted one month

before the actual study. Then, it took two months to collect 310 questionnaires in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. In Taiwan, 160 questionnaires were distributed in three areas, including Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung while 150 questionnaires were delivered to the New Territories in Hong Kong. Three hundred and ten samples were all valid samples.

4. Findings

In order to answer the first research question, “What factors affect students when choosing English Buxibans?”, a descriptive statistic was conducted. According to the statistical analysis, students in Taiwan and Hong Kong share almost the same reasons to select a Buxiban. Teaching methods and teaching materials were viewed to be the top reasons affecting students’ choice of a Buxiban. The researchers assumed that one of the reasons for Hong Kong students to choose a Buxiban was due to the appearance and educational background of a teacher as literature review stated this factor [21]. Yet, surprisingly, the results showed that those reasons were not so important. In addition, in Taiwan, the researchers predicted that students chose Buxibans due to reputation. However, this reason was not listed in the top three. As a result, it can be concluded that varied teaching methods and teaching materials were ranked as the top priority for students choosing a Buxiban both in Taiwan and in Hong Kong. Table 2 shows the details.

Table 2. The Descriptive Statistics Results for Taiwanese and Hong Kong Students Choosing a Buxiban

Terms	Taiwan		Hong Kong	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Enjoy Buxiban’s teaching methods	100 (62.5%)	1	126 (84%)	1
Teaching materials are more interesting	85 (53.1%)	2	114 (76%)	2
Has varied teaching methods	75 (46.9%)	3	75 (46.9%)	3
Reputation of the English Buxiban	59 (36.9%)	4	61 (40.7%)	4
Teachers’ educational background	26 (16.3%)	5	55 (36.7%)	5
Foreign teachers	14 (8.7%)	6	38 (30.6%)	7
Teachers’ appearance	2 (1.2%)	7	46 (25.3%)	6

As for research question two, “What are the reasons students go to an English Buxiban?” In order to find out the answer, another frequency descriptive statistic was computed. According to statistical analysis, 56.9 % of students in Taiwan did not go to an English Buxiban to kill time; students believed they could get extra study time at Buxiban. A reason Taiwan students did go was they believed the resources provided by Buxibans were attractive (35.1%). However, it does not equally bring an ideal outcome that their English score actually improved. The finding showed that only 19.4 % of them indicated that their English had improved after attending courses provided from Buxibans.

On the contrary, the main reason for Hong Kong students choosing to attend a Buxiban was that abundant resources were provided there (52.6%). This result was in line with the study carried out by Wei et al. [16]. The

Hong Kong examination system changed dramatically in 2009 [31]. The way to test students was undecided at that time. Therefore, Buxibans would use previously given tests and practice tests designed by them to lure students to attend a Buxiban. More than half of the students went to Buxibans for getting extra resources and help. Another two reasons that made students go to Buxibans was for studying rather than killing time (43.4%) and improving their English scores (41.3%). Unlike Taiwanese students, more students in Hong Kong went to Buxibans out of concern for their scores (41.3%). They also wanted to make good use of their time, but the main reason for going to a Buxiban was to improve their English grades.

Surprisingly, there were only a few Taiwan participants who were forced by their parents to attend a Buxiban (4.4%), which was listed as the last cause. Comparing to the situation in Taiwan, Hong Kong parents seemed to have more influence on their children (30%) going to a Buxiban. Moreover, peer influence in Taiwan and Hong Kong was slightly different. 15.1% of students in Taiwan went to Buxibans because of influence from peers or friends while 32.6 % for Hong Kong students. Table 3 lists the details.

Table 3. The Descriptive Statistics of the Causes for Taiwanese and Hong Kong Students Going to a Buxiban

Terms	Taiwan		Hong Kong	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Not for killing time	91 (56.9%)	1	65 (43.4%)	2
Various resources	56 (35.1%)	2	79 (52.6%)	1
English scores	31 (19.4%)	3	62 (41.3%)	3
Friends	24 (15.1%)	4	49 (32.6%)	4
Forced by parents	7 (4.4%)	5	45 (30%)	5

Research question three, “Which skills do students think they improve the most after attending an English Buxiban?” Another descriptive statistic was computed to examine the differences. According to Wu [18], Taiwanese English examinations mainly focus on vocabulary and grammar patterns. Taiwanese students think they have a great improvement on vocabulary (75.1%) and grammar (70.7%) after they attend a Buxiban. The outcome of this study seemed to be in line with Wu’s study.

On the contrary, Hong Kong students did not think they have much improvement on vocabulary. Instead, most of them found they improved most on grammar (45.3%) and listening (42.7%). This is because Hong Kong’s English public examination puts more emphasis on listening and integrated skills, therefore, students are required to have better listening, writing, reading, and grammar knowledge. As a result, Hong Kong’s English Buxibans focuses more on listening and integrated skills to make sure students can pass that benchmark. Table 4 presents the details.

Table 4. The Descriptive Statistics of Students’ Improvement of English Skills after Joining a Buxiban

Terms	Taiwan		Hong Kong	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Vocabulary	120 (75.1%)	1	58 (38.7%)	5
Grammar	113 (70.7%)	2	68 (45.3%)	1
Reading	101 (63.2%)	3	62 (41.3%)	4
Speaking	90 (56.2%)	4	53 (35.3%)	6
Writing	87 (54.4%)	5	63 (42%)	3
Listening	85 (53.2%)	6	64 (42.7%)	2

Table 5. t-test Comparison between Taiwan and Hong Kong

	Area	M	SD	Leven's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
				F	Sig.	t	Freedom	Sig.
Improvements	Taiwan N=160	8.23	1.75	5.070	.025*	-4.19	308	.000
	Hong Kong N=150	9.11	1.98					

Notes: $p < .05^*$.

To answer research question four, "Does the perception of English learning at a Buxiban differ between Taiwanese and Hong Kong students?" An independent samples t-test was computed. The result showed, students from Taiwan and Hong Kong do have a different perception of their learning in Buxibans, $F=5.070$, $t=.025$, $p < .05$. Eighty-five Taiwanese students (53%) perceived going to a Buxiban did improve their English score whereas only 66 Hong Kong students (44%) acknowledged their improvement was from attending a Buxiban. Meanwhile, 97 Hong Kong students (65%) expected to continue studying at a Buxiban but as for Taiwan students only 38 (24%) indicated they expected to continue study at a Buxiban. Table 5 provides the results.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to investigate students' intentions of going to Buxibans, if their perspectives on Buxiban learning culture, and whether their perceptions differed between Hong Kong and Taiwan students. The results were similar in both Hong Kong and Taiwan high school students were attending Buxibans due to teaching methods and more attractive and interesting learning materials. This result is consistent with the statement in the literature review [32,33]. As for teachers who teach in a public high school or a national university, this outcome is considered eye-opening. When did we stop using dynamic teaching approaches that resulted in losing our students' attention in the public educational system? Surely, it is fair to say, the market for Buxibans will always exist and even the market share will continue to increase if our students continue to feel teaching is inadequate or dull in school classrooms.

Second, Taiwanese students go to Buxibans for actual study rather than killing time. On the contrary, half of Hong Kong students went to Buxibans for a greater amount of resources about learning English. This finding is also confirmed by Lin's study in 2008 in which students went to Buxibans because they wanted more resources, and Buxibans provided authentic materials more relevant to their learning preference. They have a clear goal and long for learning more. The phenomenon also deserves English teachers' attention. It could be stated that students feel they do not get enough English ability training from formal classrooms. This also explains why Buxibans have the opportunity to remain strong both in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Thirdly, it is interesting to note that areas of improvement were different for Taiwanese and Hong Kong students after attending a Buxiban. Taiwanese

students indicated their improvement in vocabulary, grammar, and reading. However, Hong Kong students noted their progress was in listening and writing skills. Obviously, Hong Kong students speaking ability is more fluent than Taiwan students whereas Taiwan students may perform better when taking tests. Therefore, English education policy for Taiwan should consider giving more training for listening and speaking instead of being so skewed toward grammar and reading. The ultimate goal for English is not only examination proficiency, but also used English as a tool for communication thus meeting worldwide market needs resulting in global competition.

Lastly, a phenomenon discovered in this study was that Buxiban employment of foreigners to attract students did not seem to achieve the intended result. Buxiban employment of foreigners to attract students did not show much significant impact. This cause ranked number 6 and 7. Only 14 students in Taiwan believe this attracted them to choose a Buxiban, whereas 38 students in Hong Kong chose this particular cause. Also, Hong Kong students indicated teacher's appearance and their educational background were important [34] but Taiwan students take this aspect less seriously.

In Asia, parents more likely manipulated students' decisions of studying; researchers predicted that most students would choose a Buxiban based on parental insistence. Hsu [22] and Yang [23] both stated parents played a significant role in making their children go to a Buxiban. However, the finding of this study indicated the influence from peers and friends was more significant than parents. This does not surprise the authors at all. In this generation, most families consist of one child or few children with double income parents. Children have more freedom and their opinions are more valued than before. They normally receive more influence from peers. The impact of collectivism continues in this generation [28]. In addition, though both areas' students agree they did make improvement in English learning, Taiwan students showed that they would not be as likely to continue studying at a Buxiban as Hong Kong students. Even though intent to continue study at Buxibans did not show the same desire, Buxiban administrators or teachers still need to explore this matter. Buxibans, have another name, cram schools. Maybe the way of cramming knowledge into students or pushing excessively hard for success makes students eventually lose interest in learning.

5.1. Limitations

A couple of limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, the questionnaires were delivered to three of the largest cities in Taiwan and one major town in Hong Kong without getting more participants from urban

or rural areas. Participants who came from large cities may share similar characteristics and their perceptions of Buxibans could be similar, causing the outcome to be too subjective. In addition, almost half of the participants were from the third grade in senior high school. This situation might lower the reliability of the study's outcome. Most students in the senior year bear heavy pressure of taking the college entrance examination. Their motivation of studying at a Buxiban can be strong; therefore, their answers to the questionnaire may be skewed and develop a potential bias.

5.2. Suggestions for Future Studies

For further studies related to students' perspective on learning at a Buxiban, the following suggestions should be held in mind. First, to further explore the result of this study, a researcher may consider an in-depth interview or classroom observations. Also a pre-test and post-test may be used for obtaining a more convincing conclusion. Second, a future study may compare Buxiban students' viewpoint and learning outcome differences between cities and urban areas. Next, participants should be drawn from all ages to compare their different opinions. Lastly, this issue and study should be duplicated in many more countries that view English as their second/foreign language and treat studying at a Buxiban as a common thing for students. Therefore, to explore and expand other students' perception on Buxiban learning culture and learning outcome are recommended for future studies.

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