

ELT IN KOREA: ENGLISH AS A COMPULSORY SUBJECT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND ITS CHALLENGES

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Abstract: As the impact of colonization, the teaching of English in Korea experiences some ups and downs. During Japan colonization, the teaching of English was discouraged, even there was an effort to annihilate English from Korea. After the liberation, the teaching of English was started again for a purpose of maintaining international relationship. To foster people's capability of English, the Korean government has placed English as a compulsory subject in elementary school starting at Grade 3 to Grade 6 under the Seventh Curriculum Reform in 1997. Such policy leads to some pros and contras among English practitioners. This paper discusses three different opinions from three different writers whose recommendations of such issues are related to each other. First, it presents briefly the writers' opinions about the policy of implementing English education in elementary schools in Korea. Second, it discusses the writers' recommendations related to the unsolved issue. Eventually, the conclusion is taken based on the discussion and presented in the form of summary.

Key words: Korea, English Teaching

The implementation of English education in Korean elementary schools has become popular issues among people, practitioners, and government. Lee (2004) in her paper entitled "*Multi-Layered Aspects of Language Policy: Implementing English Education at Elementary Schools in Korea*" analyzes this issues in two aspects, namely, the current language policy in the history of education reforms in Korea, and the actors and their roles in the language policy. Igawa (2007), in the article entitled "*Issues in English Language Education at Korean at Elementary Schools*", discusses the educational challenges of teaching English in Korean Elementary Schools, namely, (1) age of initial instruction, (2) access to effective English instruction, and (3) professional development need of Korean teachers of English. Among those three issues, the need of professional development occupies the highest challenge since, based on the survey, many Korean elementary school teachers feel that they lack of language proficiency and language pedagogy. To overcome the problem of professional development, he proposes a government-sponsored INSET (in-service training). Shim and Baik (2004) in their article "*English Education in South Korea*" explore whether the government policy provisions are sufficient for the practical need of the Korean public; if they are, whether such policy provisions are actually being

implemented through official channels of education, and the role of private sector in English education in Korea. There is a difference between the government policy recommendation in the curriculum and what the students want to get from schools. On the other hand, the involvement of private sector in Korean English education businesses cannot be taken aside as many Korean children go to private English courses before they learn English at school.

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATION

This part discusses the issues written by the three writers and their recommendations about the related issues.

Lee's (2004) Analysis

In analyzing language policy and planning related to the implementation of English education in Korean elementary schools, Lee starts with the history of curricular reforms in Korea from 1953 to 1997. In 1997, the new government promotes the significance of individualism and human rights, the policy of education also changes. The government view that one way to improve the quality of people's life is through providing more equal opportunities in education. Therefore, education reform is considered as one way to solve problems from the previous era and a brilliant way to cope with globalization. There is a need to maintain English language skill and utilize it in the new information technology. After going through some curriculum reform, under the strong presidential support, starting from 1997 English is taught as compulsory subject in elementary school since the 3rd grade. The goal is to develop communicative competence of Korean students so that they can actively take role in the global community.

Further, Lee analyzes the actors involved in language learning program (LPP). The analysis shows that three parties are involved in making the LPP: governmental bodies, academia, and elementary school teachers. The highest level of authority is hold by the Ministry of Education and governmental bodies whose role is the most important. They are responsible to the order of the new presidency to make quick step in response to the globalization era. The Ministry of Education charge the researchers and professors to develop a new model of curriculum, beside conducting researches in search of the foundation of new language education policy. There are also some panel discussions and seminars inviting scholars, researchers, and elementary teachers. In other word, language education specialists and classrooms practitioners are given opportunities to contribute their ideas in the development of curriculum altogether with the textbooks. Lee admits that even though the government has made tremendous efforts in implementing the language policy, there are some remained unsolved problems such as updating textbooks, revising curriculum, providing supportive teaching materials.

Igawa's (2007) opinions

Slightly different from Lee, Igawa classifies the issues of teaching English in Korean elementary schools into three aspects, namely, age of initial instruction, access to effective English instruction, and professional development

needs of NNS (Non-Native Speaking) English teacher. In term of age of initial instruction, there is no unanimous theory about at what age English (L2) must be introduced. SLA researchers and ELT professionals only make assumption that “the earlier the introduction to second language, the better the result”. Therefore, **the quantity and quality of English instruction in elementary school is more important**. Whereas, in the discussion about access to effective English instruction Igawa shares the fact that there is **an inequity** between children from the cities and the rural areas as well as the children from wealthy family and the poor in gaining the access at private schools, after school language lesson, or the opportunity to study abroad. Igawa criticizes that early introduction to English to might become another source of inequity as traditionally, Korean society consists of some divisions like mentioned previously. Besides those two issues, there is another crucial issue which needs immediate response, that is the professional development needs of Non Native Speaker English teacher. Igawa highlights that the needs of professional development lay upon two aspects, the target language need; to develop and maintain English, and the pedagogical skill; to boost knowledge and skills of teaching. Because the teachers in elementary schools are homeroom teachers, an **in-service training program** might be designed to improve the teachers’ proficiency of English. The pedagogical aspect in professional development, however, can be overcome by the **application of Communicative Language Teaching**.

In addition to the above main issues, Igawa also exposes a comparison of English Language Education at the elementary school between Korea and two other nations, Taiwan, and Japan as adopted from Butler (2004). The matrix shows that, compared to the two countries, Korea is one step ahead than Taiwan and Japan because there is a strong government initiative. Whereas, in both two other countries, English is taught in some elementary schools as local choice. Related to the number of lesson hours, Korea allows longer period than those two competing countries. Therefore, it can be concluded that Korea does more efforts in preparing the students to be capable of communicating in English.

Similarly, in the curricular aspects, the Korean government takes part very much in articulating teaching objectives, teaching guidelines, the selection of teaching materials and textbooks, the teaching methods, and the medium of instructions. It has been already subtle to which direction the teaching of English in Korean elementary schools is taken.

Shim and Baik’s (2004) opinions

Shim and Baik start their discussion of ELT in Korea by reviewing the curriculum of ELT in Korea. The government recognise the importance of ELT in Korea since 1969, in the second curriculum reform, by deciding that English is the first and the only foreign language taught in Korea. During this time, the official methodology to teach such language was not yet adopted until the fifth curriculum reform was made and officially stated that the methodology was based on the mixture of grammar-translation method and audio-lingual method (Shim *et al.* 1990, 31). Then, in the seventh curriculum, there is a change of methodology, from emphasizing grammatical competence to emphasizing

communicative competence. In this revised curriculum, the teaching of English in elementary school is also taken account. The aim is to develop a basic communicative competence that enables students to understand and use everyday English and to raise the students' awareness of foreign language culture so as to introduce Korean culture to foreigners.

Shim and Baik note that this milestone also results on several problems like the **arrangement of such curriculum cannot satisfy general public's need**. The government emphasizes on reaching certain level of English proficiency, while the students need to achieve high scores in the entrance test. Thus, the teachers are in the intersection between government recommendation on the one hand and the need of students-parents on the other. The teachers must not ignore the government recommendation because they have to report regularly on how they carry out the teaching and learning based on the recommendation. On the other hand, they are not allowed to disregard the students because they are evaluated constantly by the students, parents, and schools, especially on the students' success on test.

Another rising problem is many elementary school teachers do not have sufficient English proficiency because most of the elementary teachers are homeroom teachers and they do not get any training specifically in English teaching. The government provide 120 to 240 hours training for elementary school teachers, both including methodology and proficiency. In fact, the training is not enough to produce highly-competent English teachers. Therefore, Shim and Baik recommend that **the government provide re-training at a more advanced level** before claiming that elementary English teachers in Korea have enough training.

One good news about children learning English in Korea is that more than 90% of them receive their private English education before they attend elementary school. So, they have learned English much earlier before they learn it officially at elementary school. Parents tend to send their children to some private courses to get some communicative training. This situation is a proof that English becomes the second major language in Korea, of course, after the national language.

EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The issues of teaching English as compulsory subject in elementary schools in Korea are interesting to be viewed from several points of view. In term of government policy, it seems that the government has made enormous efforts to make the teaching of English more and more successful. Whereas, in the practitioners' point of view, there are some problems remaining such as many elementary teachers are not ready to teach English using more recent methodologies. Besides, there is an inequity of the opportunities of the children in the cities and the rural areas, the children of the wealth and the poor. The three writers analyze these issues differently, but all of them show their support to the implementation of teaching English in Korean elementary schools and agree that there are challenges in making better teaching and learning. To make it easier to understand, the analyses are summarized in the following table.

Table. 1. **Policy of Implementing English Education in Korean Elementary Schools and Its Challenges** (Based on Lee, 2004; Igawa, 2007; Shim & Baik, 2004)

Author	Issues discussed	Analysis	Recommendation
Lee (2004)	Multi-layered aspects of implementing English education in elementary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ministry of education and governmental bodies are the highest authority in developing curriculum • The amount and quality of participation from language practitioners and researchers are not enough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the quantity and quality of English instruction in elementary schools. • Conducting in – service training program which include; (a) improving the teachers’ proficiency of English, and (b) methodology of teaching through the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)
Igawa (2007)	Rising problems as the consequence of implementing English education in elementary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no serious problem dealing with the age of initiation of English • There is inequity of the opportunities among children learning English • There are problems of the elementary teacher’s proficiency in English and methodology to teach English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retraining elementary school teachers at a more advanced level for those who has got 120 hours training, so that they have sufficient skill and knowledge about how to teach English properly.
Shim & Baik (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public satisfaction as the result of implementing English elementary school • Private sector’s involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a gap between the recommendation of the government and the students-parents practical needs of English • There is a tremendous contribution of private institution in supporting the implementation of the policy of English education in Korean elementary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rearrangement curriculum aspects which can meet the publics’ need.

Improving The Quantity and Quality of English Instruction in Elementary Schools

Both Lee and Igawa realize that the government's policy about initiating second language earlier to will lead to a controversy, especially in term of political concern. Some oppositions against that idea include the following; (1) the potential threat to a national identity, (2) lack of necessary conditions such as proficient teachers, (3) lack of school equipment, (4) young students' inability to retain new language skills, (5) educational burden to parents, (6) the belief that English should not be a core subject, (7) potential complications to secondary English education, and finally, (8) a weak guarantee of any positive correlation between age and successful acquisition (Bae, 1995). Contrary to this opposition, Lee argues that the language policy is supported by some researches and theories. For example, the Critical Period Hypothesis for second language acquisition which claims that teaching language earlier is better. There is no established theory about second language acquisition which stated exactly at what age the second language should be taught. Quoting from Kim (1988), Lee explains that there is a positive relationship between learning English in elementary school and achieving greater language proficiency.

Igawa underlines that as far as the educational concern, the opposition is not significant. He notes that in terms of the frequency and length of English lessons, 1-2 hour/week for 3rd to 6th graders do not seem to negatively influence the L1 development and the quality of instruction must be emphasized, for instance, by hiring qualified English teachers or stipulate good textbooks. Increasing the class hours in elementary schools and hiring English conversation instructors in addition to regular school teachers may help to improve the quantity and quality of English instruction.

Conducting In-Service Training Program and Retraining Program for A More Advanced Level for The Elementary School Teachers Who Have Got In-Service Training.

Nunan (2003) in Igawa (2004) conducts a survey in some Asia –Pacific countries and all the countries surveyed state that they apply Communicative Language Teaching. However, it seems it is only rhetoric because the fact shows that mostly teachers have poor English skills as well as inadequate preparation which results on the difficulty in implementing Communicative Language Teaching in the classrooms.

Another survey conducted by Butler (2004) in mapping out professional development need of Non Native Speaker (NNS) teachers of English at elementary schools in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. The results show that the productive skills such as speaking and writing of the teachers are lower than their receptive skills. There is a gap between the teachers' proficiency level and the students' required minimum proficiency level. This means that mostly the teachers cannot meet the standard. This situation is also true in Korean context because primarily they are homeroom teachers, they are not English instruction specialists. The implication is that there is great need of professional training. The statistics show that until the year 2000 many teachers, 100,004 out of

140,000 have received 120 to 140 hours of training. Only the teachers who have got the training are allowed to teach English at grade 3 above.

Igawa proposes that the in-service training program should consist of English skills development program. The design must be emphasized on improving the teachers'

proficiency either oral or written. Although the official approach suggested by the curriculum is Communicative Language Teaching which emphasizes on oral communication, the teachers are not confident to speak English in the classroom due to their low ability of English. Some studies, then, are questioning about the appropriateness of CLT in Asia context. Igawa proposes to make a kind of adaptation of CLT which is sensitive to the Asian society need.

Shim and Baik (2004) proposes a retraining program for elementary school teacher who have got in-service training program to a more advanced level to make the teacher reach higher confident to implement CLT. The reasons are 120-hours program is not enough to claim that the teacher is well trained and the truism is that only few teachers have goodwill to improve their English by themselves.

Rearrangement of Curriculum Aspects Which Can Meet The Publics' Need.

As mentioned previously, there is a gap between the government and the students' need. The goal of an elementary education comprises the coach of the child's developing personality, the education of the "whole" person and education for literacy (Seel and Dijkstra, 2004:151). Shim and Baik (2004) quote from the curriculum that the goal and objective of teaching is to develop a basic communicative competence that enables the students to understand and use everyday English. However, these goal and objectives are not reflected in the test for attending higher level of education. Lee (2004) notices that this gap lays upon the form of testing items which only emphasize memoration. Therefore, the students and parents only focus on the strategies to get higher scores and pass the examination, not on developing communicative competency. Realizing this fact, Lee and Shim and Baik recommend some reforms on curriculum aspects such as goal, objective, teaching method, and teaching materials which meet the people's need.

CONCLUSIONS

From the discussions above, it can be concluded that the policy of implementing English as compulsory subjects in Korea lead to some pros and cons. For example, there is a worry that early initiation of second language, in this English, will bother the first language learning. It should not be serious problem because the theory in SLA does not clearly state at what age the second language can be introduced. The second opposition is dealing with the teachers' mastery on language skills and pedagogy. However, this condition can be made better by conducting in-service training program which focuses on language skills and teaching methodology. To keep the teachers update English skills and pedagogy, a retraining program for elementary teacher is highly recommended. The last, due to the fact that there is a gap between the curriculum and the

practice, a reform on curriculum aspects such as goal, objectives, teaching method, and teaching materials is really needed to make the teaching of English successful.

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