

Elementary School English Language Education in Korea

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Abstract

On November 19th, 2011, the Center for English Language Education at Elementary Schools at Naruto University of Education was honored to have Back Young Kim speak at our annual symposium. Kim has been the supervisor in charge of elementary school English language education at the Incheon metropolitan city office of education for three years. Previously, she taught English at elementary school for 18 years. In her current position, she oversees the curriculum implementation at all elementary schools in her district and is responsible for teacher training and students' academic achievement in English. As the featured speaker at the 2011 symposium, she spoke about English language education at elementary schools in Korea, describing the curriculum, various supplementary and core materials and teacher training. The content of her presentation is summarized herein.

Key words: Elementary English education, Korea, Incheon

1. Background

English language education at the elementary school level was introduced in Korea 12 years ago. Until last year, grades three and four received one lesson per week, while grades five and six received two lessons per week. From the current academic year (2011), each grade is now receiving one additional class per week. Therefore, grades three and four have English classes twice a week and grades five and six have English class three times per week. It is felt that younger learners (grades one and two) must further develop their first language ability before studying a second language. Each class is 40 minutes in length and class sizes typically range from 25 to 30 students. Schools are able to choose the

textbook from a number of approved private publishers. Prior to 2012, grades five and six studied from a single textbook, published by the Ministry of Education. Since English is a full subject (not a “subject area” as it is in Japan), there is due focus on skill-based learning. However, skills are seen as a means of communicating, and fluency is more important than accuracy.

When English first became a subject in Korea, homeroom teachers were required to teach it in principle, as is currently the case in Japan. This proved to be quite difficult, however, and in practice, schools usually appointed teachers to teach English based on ability or desire. Today, all schools have especially appointed English teachers and it is expected that English classes will be conducted using English as the primary language for communication. A typical school has two or three English teachers, whose duties are distinct from the other homeroom teachers. It is important to note that there is no required qualification to become an English teacher, but there is a national six-month in-service teacher training program as well as a national ability test for teachers. Usually teachers who have completed the in-service training program are appointed to teach English when they return to school. The ability test was just implemented in the academic year of 2011. It is called the “Teaching English in English Test” (TEE Test). There are two levels: the TEE Pro and the TEE Doctor. The test requires teachers to provide model lessons which are judged by a panel. It is not mandatory at the moment but teachers are strongly recommended to take it. The test also has a bearing on promotion and career advancement.

Generally, Korean students are very active in class and interested in English. However, as in other countries, teachers have to deal with some common problems. Firstly, there is often a large level gap within a single class. Some students’ English ability is far more advanced than their peers’, while other students struggle with English. This level gap is a constant challenge to teachers. Upper grade students also show a general decline in interest in English and tend to be less interested in songs, which they often encounter in English class. Finally, teachers must deal with occasional behavioral problems, such as students’ fighting in class. Although teachers are in principle supposed to teach English using English as the medium of instruction, it is appropriate to use Korean when dealing with such problems in class. The exact mix of L1 (Korean) and L2 (English) will depend on the individual circumstances and needs of the students.

2. Co-teaching

Co-teaching is a major feature of English language education in Korean

elementary school. Korean English teachers must teach with a native English-speaking teacher 50% of the time. (These assistant teachers are generally referred to as ALTs in Japan.) Approximately 90% of schools have at least one full time native teacher stationed at the school. These teachers provide ideal language models for students in class and help to motivate students to communicate in English. Co-teaching is usually good, but occasional problems arise which are very similar to Japan. Native teachers often experience various problems in their daily lives because they usually do not speak Korean and may experience difficulty with Korean culture. Korean English teachers are usually responsible for the native teachers and provide assistance, including helping native teachers go to the hospital when they are sick, helping them with financial issues and banking, and so on. In class also, occasional stresses arise. For example, some native teachers may be stubborn and Korean teachers don't want to get involved, leaving native teachers to conduct the lesson entirely. Native teachers, however, are usually not trained or qualified as language teachers so they should not be expected or relied upon to lead the lesson. They are also often not as familiar with the curriculum which Korean teachers must follow in class. Ideally, lessons should be coordinated between the two teachers and should follow the curriculum. It is very important for the two teachers to meet for at least fifteen or twenty minutes before the class to plan. In the same way that a building needs a blueprint, a lesson requires a plan which both teachers understand.

3. Scope and contents

The overall goals of the English curriculum are listed sequentially below:

- I. Students will have confidence and be interested in English and acquire basic communication skills.
- II. Students will be able to have conversations about their daily routines and general topics
- III. Students will understand and utilize various information about foreign cultures.
- IV. Through understanding foreign cultures, students will recognize and see their own culture from a new perspective.

In many language programs, the basic goals, which then become the starting point of the curriculum, are defined in purely linguistic terms. Material is developed according to a pre-determined list of grammar and vocabulary items

(form). In other words, grammar and vocabulary is the foundation of the curriculum. By contrast, in the Korean elementary school English curriculum, the starting point is content, rather than form. A series of topics and cultural content such as cultural differences between Korean and Western societies form the foundation of the English program. Appropriate grammatical expressions and vocabulary are then chosen depending on the topics and cultural content. Therefore, in principle, form is subservient to meaning. The foundation of the English curriculum is content, rather than language elements. Table 1 summarizes the contents of the curriculum.

Table 1: *Scope and contents of elementary school English*

Scope	Contents
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal, school and home life • Social life, personal relations • Environment (animals, plants, seasons, weather, etc.) • Life, habits, health and exercise
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways of living and language culture for communication • Language and behavior of Western societies • Cultural differences between Western and Korean societies • Introduction of Korean culture and way of life to foreigners
Expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural acquisition of language and authentic communication • Basic expressions used in daily lives will be taught more frequently • Relationship between sounds and words
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic vocabulary • New vocabulary for each grade 3rd grade : 120 words 4th grade : 120 words 5th grade : 140 words 6th grade : 140 words (Total within 520 words)
Length of single sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3rd, 4th grade : less than 7 words in a sentence • 5th, 6th grade : less than 9 words in a sentence (‘and, or, but’ are exceptional)

4. Communicative competence and the four skills

Unlike Japan, in Korea, we focus on the four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing, with the end goal of developing students’ communicative

competence. South Korea has adapted a working construct of communicative competence illustrated in Figure 1.

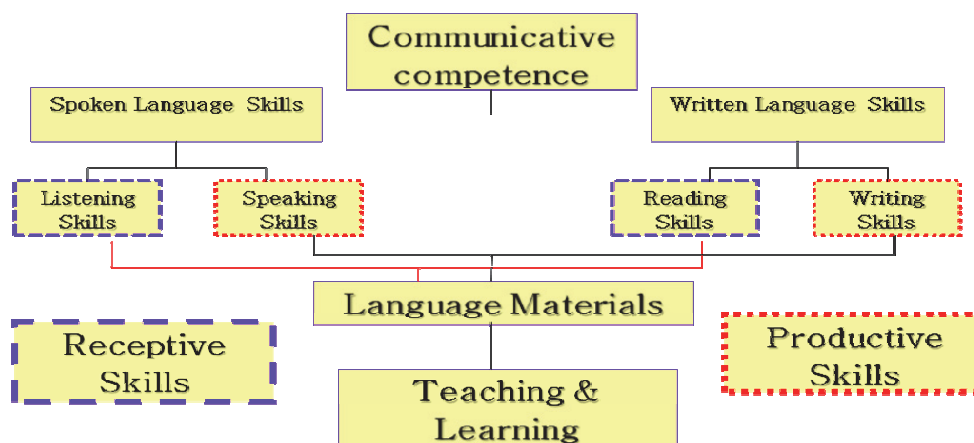


Figure 1: Outline of the 7th elementary English curriculum

Generally speaking, communicative competence refers to a learner’s practical ability to use a language for receiving and conveying meaning. This requires receptive skills: listening and reading; and productive skills: speaking and writing. Listening and speaking are necessary to develop spoken language ability, while reading and writing skills are necessary for written language ability. These four skills interact to give a measure of communicative competence. As such, Korea has adopted an integrated approach for language education. Language material and teaching approaches are designed so that students develop all four skills in tandem, as they progress through each unit of study.

5. The flow of a typical lesson

Individual lessons should follow a similar prescribed sequence. Table 2 describes the recommended flow for individual lessons. After a greeting, teachers usually do a warming-up activity such as having the students sing a song or practice a chant. Figure 2 illustrates the chant conducted during the Naruto University of Education Center for English Language Education at Elementary Schools annual symposium. This type of chant allows teachers to expand the input that students receive. Students have heard “How are you?”, “I’m fine thank you.” However, in actual situations they need a broader repertoire of expressions.

Table 2: Lesson planning

Step	Contents
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greeting • Warming-up • Review • Presentation
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice • Production
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summing-up and assessment • Preview

Following the chant, teachers typically review the last lesson before presenting the target of the current lesson. A pre-task activity is often used to present the target. For example, students might look at a picture from the textbook and guess what is going to happen, prompted by focused questions from teachers. Teachers then go on to develop the lesson, providing controlled practice of the target, followed by a more student-centered, meaning-focused (communicative) activity or task, which serves as a “Production”. Teachers usually close the lesson by summarizing and then previewing the next lessons.

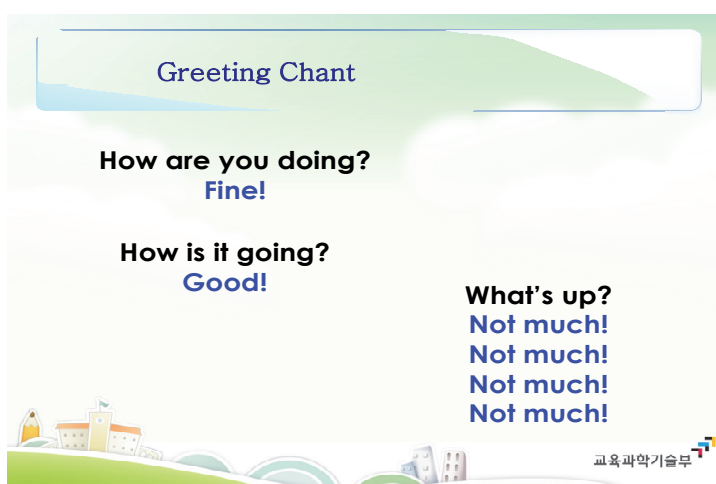


Figure 2: Greeting Chant

6. The flow of a typical unit

Typically, one unit spans 6 classes. The first class focuses on listening and speaking. Teachers usually begin the unit by showing students a picture and asking

questions to elicit some of the themes, functions or form in the unit. This provokes students' creativity and acts as a schema-building activity. Then, teachers conduct a listening activity related to the picture which further serves to introduce the themes of the unit. After conducting the listening activity, teachers ask students two or three content questions so that students focus on the content when teachers play the listening text again. In this way, the first lesson focuses on listening (but not to the complete exclusion of speaking as well). Listening is seen as being very important. It is generally felt that before one can speak, one must be able to listen. This is how infants require their first language, and research indeed underscores the importance of listening to facilitate speaking ability.

The second class of a typical unit focuses on a dialogue between two people. Students are able to hear and *see* the dialogue, which is included in the educational software package which teachers employ in the classroom. The aim of the second class is to allow students time to practice the new form. The educational software allows students to practice the dialogue in various ways. For example, students can do repetition practice, repeating after the characters while simultaneously reading subtitles. Students can repeat the activity without the subtitles, or alternatively, teachers can display the subtitles while eliminating the audio. The second lesson also includes a song, which highlights the form of the unit. The software gives teachers the option of displaying the musical notation or showing students a video of characters dancing along to the music. In my observation, however, grades five and six students regrettably do not seem to like the song.

In the third class, students focus more on reading. The software has a recording function which allows students to speak into a microphone and listen to their output on playback. The fourth class then focuses on writing. The fifth class is allotted for "story time". A narrative story is woven into each unit of the textbook. In the fifth class teachers focus on the story and can use it to practice different skills as required, particularly listening and reading. The sixth class is then allotted for review and assessment.

7. General advice to teachers in my capacity as a supervisor at the Incheon metropolitan city office of education

Within this general framework, there is still a lot of freedom for teachers to choose supplementary material. Using technology to facilitate learning has been encouraged in Korea and a vast range of supplementary materials can be easily found on-line. Within Korea, teachers often use material from the website:

<http://www.ebse.co.kr/ebs/index.laf>. Teachers are also encouraged to use <http://www.youtube.com/> (“youtube”), which can be accessed in Japan and around the world. Youtube has a wealth of material made for children studying English as a first or second language. Entering search words such as “alphabet” or “phonics song” yields numerous videos which often have an authentic feeling that textbooks lack. Teachers are recommended to explore the vast array of material which is instantly available for free on line. Youtube is a good starting point.

As a final note, we all want to be “The Best Teacher.” Every teacher has a different style. Sometimes subject matter might be best presented in a teacher-centered way that might be seen in a traditional math or science lesson. However, I would recommend that teachers view English in the same way that they might view a physical education class. Students don’t learn how to play basketball by listening to a lecture about the sport. They learn by being involved. Likewise, teachers should try to shed their traditional notions about teacher-centered approaches and have some fun with students. Singing and dancing in class sets an ideal example for students and increases motivation, making English class more fun. The best teachers are active in class and involve students, keeping in mind the old expression:

Tell me and I will forget
Show me and I will remember
Involve me and I will understand