

The Status-quo and the Potential of Primary English Education in Korea

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Official start

In Korea, English education in primary schools officially started from third grade in 1997. In some private or public schools, English was taught as an extracurricular subject from 1982. For the age of information and globalization, the importance of foreign languages was emphasized and policies strengthening foreign language education were implemented.

English language education was emphasized, and problems of English education focusing too much on memorization and grammar learning was pointed out. As a result, elementary school English as a regular subject has started with a focus on oral fluency. Despite much controversy in the beginning stage, the policy is considered to have contributed to the improvement of Korean students' oral English ability.

Curriculum

The seventh national curriculum (1997-2006) was developed and implemented in 1999 for elementary schools. From the seventh curriculum, learning contents were described in terms of achievement standards for each language skills. As the curriculum emphasized a differentiated instruction according to the levels of the students, additional skill standard for highly achieved students were included.

The goals of English education were twofold: to build a basis for communication in English in everyday life; to build confidence in use of English and to acquire interest in English. Understanding foreign customs and cultures through English education was also valued.

This is now on the 2008 revised seventh curriculum. Insufficient class hours and delayed written language instruction were pointed out as problems. The revised curriculum increased the class hours per week from one to two hours for third and fourth grade, two to three hours for fifth and sixth grade. Reading and writing instruction advanced to the second semester of third grade.

Students learn about 520 words for four years. The numbers of the new vocabulary words each grade may use are as follows:

Grade 3: 120 words

Grade 4: 120 words

Grade 5: 140 words

Grade 6: 140 words (Sum: 520 words)

The curriculum was based on the Natural Approach and the Communicative Approach. Language skills are classified as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learning contents are specified as achievement standards for each language skills. Classes were activity-centered, and the dominant classroom activities were songs, chants, games, role-play and hands-on activities.

In terms of evaluation, performance-based assessment with teacher observation was encouraged. Portfolio, self- and peer- assessment were encouraged to evaluate the teaching-learning process and result.

Textbook

In the initial stage, the government-authorized elementary school English textbooks were developed including video tapes. Elementary school textbooks were unified as one national textbook because of the single textbook policy for elementary school English in 2001. A CD-ROM title for the English textbook was developed and distributed to schools since the government encourages multimedia-assisted or technology-based learning.

The national textbook was composed of eight (third and fourth grades) or 16 (fifth and sixth grades) lessons. Each lesson was made up of four periods with consistent patterns based on activities (See Table 1).

Table 1: Components of Textbooks

	3rd grade	4th grade	5th grade	6th grade
1st period	Look and Listen(1) Listen and Repeat(1) Let's Play(1)	Look and Listen(1) Listen and Repeat(1) Let's Play(1)	Look and Listen(1) Listen and Repeat(1) Let's Play(1)	Look and Listen(1) Listen and Repeat(1) Let's Play(1)
2nd period	Look and Listen(2) Listen and Repeat(2) Let's Chant-Let's Read* Let's Play(2)	Look and Listen(2) Listen and Repeat(2) Let's Read Let's Play(2)	Let's Speak Listen and Repeat(2) Let's Sing/Chant Let's Play	Look and Speak Listen and Repeat(2) Let's Read Let's Play(2)

3 rd period	Look and Speak Let's Sing-Let's Write* Let's Play	Let's Chant Let's Write Let's Play(3)	Let's Read Let's Write Let's Play	Let's Sing/Chant Let's Play Let's Write
4 th period	Let's Role-play Let's Review	Let's Role-play Let's Review	Role-Play (Activity) Let's Review	Role-Play (Activity) Let's Review

(* Written language instruction begins in the second semester of 3rd grade)

TEE policy

The Ministry of Education adopted TEE (Teaching English in English) policy from the 2008 revised seventh curriculum and recommend English teachers to use English in the classroom. To facilitate teachers' English use, TEE teacher certification is implemented. TEE certificate has two levels: TEE-Ace and TEE-Master. The qualification for each level is the following:

Table 2: Qualification for the TEE Certificate

	TEE-Ace	TEE-Master
Teaching experience	More than 3 years	More than 7 years
In-service training index	More than 30 (about 300 training hours)	More than 80 (about 800 training hours)

(KICE, 2009)

Once they are qualified with TEE certification, the teachers need to take TEE tests and achieve test scores. Test types, test items, and achieving scores for primary teachers are described in Table 3.

Table 3: TEE Test for Primary Teachers

Test type	Test items	Achieving scores	
		TEE-A	TEE-M
English Teaching Knowledge Test	60 items True/False	77.0 %	87.0 %
English Teaching Practice Test	28 Items 4 scales - Very good 4	59.6 %	83 %

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good 3 - Satisfactory 2 - Unsatisfactory 1 		
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Effects and potential of primary English education

Lots of studies have reported positive effects of primary English education in terms of affective and cognitive aspects. Survey studies on primary or middle school students' attitude and perceptions showed that they found their learning English at primary school fun and they have actively participated in the English classes in primary school and that led to their active participation on the middle school. Cognitive effects were also reported which showed that tenth grade students who had primary English education performed better in the Global Test of English Communication than 11th graders who did not have primary English education.

As the curriculum of English language teaching has moved from a focus on teacher-centered classes, traditional grammatical syllabus to learner-centered classes, functional communication activities, the language classroom tends to be more communicatively oriented.

Reference

KICE. (2009). *TEE diagnostic test development*. Research Report No. CRE 2009-11(CD).