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What Universities Can Do to Help with the English Training of In-service Elementary School Teachers In Japan

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The aim of the study is to explore the role universities can play in helping to prepare in-service elementary school teachers who may additionally be asked to teach English in the very near future. First, we look at how the teaching of English fits into the new curriculum reform policy, which will be enacted in 2002. Second, a brief overview of the how teachers were trained in Korea from 1997 when English education was introduced in elementary school will be presented. An analysis of what was done in Korea is given as a framework to view possibilities for the in-service training of teachers at universities in Japan. Third, to sample views of Japanese teachers, the study will look at how teachers in the local Kumamoto area feel about English in elementary school and the training to prepare for it. Finally, proposals for what universities can do for the English training of in-service elementary teachers will be addressed.

Key words : In-service training, Comprehensive study, Elementary school teachers

1. Introduction

Under “The Educational Reform Plan for the 21st Century” the new curriculum policy centers on what The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (*Monbukagakusho*, hereafter referred to as ‘the Ministry’) refers to as comprehensive studies, *sogoteki na gakushu*. According to the Ministry, the intent of the revised curriculum is to “cultivate in children a ‘zest for living’ (*Ikiruchikara*) with which they learn, think and act for themselves in a comfortable atmosphere” (*Monbukagakusho* Homepage, 2001). These qualities of learning are to take place within an educational framework supported by 4 main pillars of Comprehensive Studies: *information processing*, *environment studies*, *health and welfare* and *international understanding*. Furthermore, these areas of study are scheduled to fit into the elementary school curriculum during periods of “integrated study” for an average of two hours a week. The relation of how English education in elementary school fits into the new Comprehensive Study Policy can be found in the area of *international understanding*. In the guidelines, The Ministry ‘suggests’ that foreign languages ‘can’ be included as a part of introducing *international understanding* into the new curriculum, but they do not say schools ‘have to’ teach them. Instead, the Ministry has opted to allow schools to decide for themselves whether or not they want to introduce a foreign language in their classes. However, for schools that are interested, the intentions of what the Ministry wants them to do about foreign languages in the new curriculum are vague. For example, information on which languages to teach, what content should

be taught, and instructional guidance on how to teach them are not pronounced in the new curriculum.

In short, the new curriculum neither mandates that a foreign language has to be taught, nor does it state that a foreign language, if introduced, should be English¹⁾. Instead, it merely mentions that schools can decide for themselves if they want to introduce foreign languages in their classes. Moreover, there are no clear guidelines for schools who want to introduce a foreign language such as English in their classrooms. Consequently, the situation for introducing English into elementary school, under the new curriculum, is radically different than in secondary schools, where it is a core subject.

1.1 English education: You can if you want to

The intent of the Ministry to introduce foreign language instruction in elementary schools as a choice to be left up to the school principles or teachers can be disconcerting at the local school level. In other words, in an educational system that is under national curriculum controls, such as in Japan (Stevenson and Baker, 1991), administrators and teachers at the local school levels are used to more direct mandates from the Ministry; when it does not come, they may remain at a loss or confused of what action to take. In this type of situation, "a constant tension develops between intent of formal policies and the ensuing actions of people and institutions (Elmore & Sykes, 1992:186). As a result, inaction by local schools can occur as they will quite often ignore intentions of curriculum policy that are unclear or appear to be problematic (Cohen & Spilane, 1992, Gorsuch, 2001). Presently, this situation may exist somewhat among elementary schools in Japan, in regards to introducing English, as we will see later in the study.

Although the majority of schools are not taking any action to introduce English, there has been some movement in the direction of introducing English in schools. For example, it has been reported that about 20% of elementary schools are introducing English in some form (Daily Yomimuri, 2001). This can be seen in the various university extension elementary schools (*Fuzoku*) and by Ministry selected pilot schools²⁾ that have fashioned their own English curriculum for their schools. Furthermore, some special government sponsored workshops aimed at training selected 'elite' teachers (Daily Yomimuri, 2001), and private organisations such as educational publishing companies have provided training assistance for teachers. However, the introduction of English in pilot schools, or training assistance provided by a few private institutions and special government supported workshops for an elite few is hardly adequate to meet the training needs of the nation's elementary school teachers who may have to teach English. As a way to cope with this situation, universities, especially faculty of education English departments, would seem to be appropriate institutions to provide not only pre-service training for its students as it currently does, but also in-service training for elementary school teachers who work in the surrounding educational communities. Next, a brief overview of in-service training that was conducted by universities in Korea will be looked at as a reference for what higher institutions in Japan might consider when conducting their own in-service training programs.

2. English Teacher Training of Korean Elementary Teachers

In 1997, English became a required subject, and today all schools in Korea teach English in elementary school from 3rd grade³⁾. Instruction is usually one or two hours a week. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Korea designed 120-hour in-service training programs to train teachers in English. The programs are intensive and take place during the longer seasonal school breaks (Ohshiro and Kanamori, 1999). In addition there is an advanced program which also consists of 120 hours. As of 1998, 45,302 teachers had gone through the initial program, and the MOE planned to send an additional 18,000 teachers in the advance program (Kwon, 1997). The teachers included non-English teachers or regular homeroom teachers (HRTs) as well as English-subject-only teachers. According to Kwon, 83% of the teachers preferred that English-subject-only teachers should be given the responsibility to teach English. However, at present, 66.6% of the English lessons are taught by HRTs and 31% by English-subject-only teachers. In the Seoul area, educational centers have done the training. 70% of the training is aimed at developing the teacher's communicative competence and 30% for English Language Training (ELT) pedagogy (Kwon, 1997). Additionally, two other studies (Yoo, 1998, Jung, 1997), which looked at in-service training done at different universities, similarly reported that approximately 70% of the courses are aimed at building language competence in English while about 30% focus on ELT pedagogy. Findings from the three studies in terms of how teachers felt about the content of the training programs are presented below:

- * All three studies report that after the teachers went through the programs, they felt the contents of the program could be improved by offering more hours for language improvement and less time should be spent on teaching theory, and methods.
- * Teachers enjoyed training in *use of classroom English, general conversation, teaching songs, games, role-plays, how to use a textbook and teaching materials*. Teaching theories were least appreciated (Yoo, Jung). Additionally, women enjoyed role-plays and games more than men, who were more concerned about pronunciation practice (Yoo).
- * More than three-fourths of the teachers surveyed wanted to have English taught by English-subject-only teachers. When the MOE tried to comply and recruit secondary (junior or senior high school) teacher certificate holders, elementary school teachers opposed and MOE cancelled the plan (Kwon).
- * Ability levels were significantly different (Yoo, Jung). It was suggested that a diagnostic test should be given to match levels of participants in training courses (Yoo).
- * English-subject-only teachers preferred more teaching practice techniques whereas HRTs preferred more language practice training (Jung).

The above evaluation of English training for elementary school teachers in Korea represented in three studies provide useful suggestions for teacher training in Japan. For example, the findings especially show

that HRTs, who represent the majority of teachers in the training programs and are without English language competence, preferred more language learning activities, and less time on language teaching theories. Additionally they were more prone to give the responsibility of teaching English to English-subject only teachers. These findings will be explored further when we view a proposed in-service training model later in the paper. Next we will look at English training in elementary school specifically from the perspective of what Japanese teachers would like in their training.

3. English in Elementary School in Japan from the Teachers' Perspective

Studies on curriculum policies show that when teachers are involved in the planning at some level, the chances for successful implementation of the intentions of the curriculum planners increase (Fullan, 1991, Markee, 1997). A beginning step in getting teachers involved in their own training is to find out from teachers themselves what they want. Next, in order to hear from teachers in Japan, this paper will cite two survey studies (Ohshiro and Kanamori, 1999, and Takehara, 1999) which focus on the teachers' perspective of how they view the introduction of English into elementary school and the training for it. In Ohshiro and Kanamori, 72 in-service elementary school teachers in Okinawa were surveyed. In Takehara, 35 elementary school teachers in the Kumamoto City school district were surveyed (55% return rate). The findings are summarised below in the following:

- * A majority of teachers want teacher training, and the training they feel they need the most is on improving their English language ability (70% in Ohshiro and Kanamori, and 77% in Takehara).
- * In both studies *English conversation*, and *lesson development and demonstration of lessons* were the top items that teachers wanted in their training. Also preferences for *English songs and games* (Ohshiro and Kanamori) and *information about other countries* (international understanding) were given (Takehara). Both studies indicated that teachers had given a lower priority toward learning about *teaching theories* in their training programs.
- * The two studies reported that team-teaching with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT)⁴⁾ was preferable, and that HRTs (e.g. 63% in Takehara) preferred English-subject-only teachers teach English⁵⁾.
- * 58% of the teachers (Ohshiro and Kanamori) want to receive their training program regularly once every two weeks or once a month, but not during the long vacation break as in the Korean training program.

The results of the above surveys which include the teacher's perspectives on what they feel they need in their training are valuable for assessing what is needed in future in-service training programs offered at universities. The implications of the results are significant when we compare similarities in the responses from the Korean surveys. For example, in both countries, teachers reported that they preferred more language improvement and practical teaching activities for the classroom to theoretical lectures on

language learning and teaching. Additionally HRTs, in both countries preferred that English-subject-only teachers teach English. However, this result may change, as HRTs would gain more confidence in their English language and teaching abilities, if they are given proper training.

The insecurity that the elementary school teachers face can be illustrated in the following (Takehara, 1999). When asked if they are worried about teaching English in the future, more than half (53%) said they are worried and only a little more than a fourth (28%) said they were looking forward to it. The rest were uncertain. In response to the question asking what problems do they foresee in their teaching, the following comments were given (comments are presented in order of highest responses; total number of respondents were 35, and each respondent could make several choices. N=number):

I cannot pronounce English well (N=24)

I do not have any confidence in my own English ability (N=23)

I do not know what kind of materials to use (N=13)

I do not know how to teach English (N=10)

The above further support what needs to be done in training programs, which is to emphasise language improvement and practical teaching suggestions. However, it seems that at present not much is being done. For example, a little under three-fourths of the teachers surveyed (Takehara, 1999) said that their 'schools' have not done any preparations for introducing English in school. In addition, more than three-fourths (76%) said that 'individually' they are not doing any preparing either. Consequently, responses from teachers indicate that they know what they need in their training, but neither their schools nor teachers themselves are doing anything about it. The gap between knowing what is needed and actually doing something about it has implications for the role faculties of education can play in offering in-service training to the elementary school teachers. In their capacity as institutes of higher education, they are in position to play a leadership role by anticipating the qualifications elementary school teachers need in the future. Thus, the role universities can play is to provide training sessions so that teachers can be adequately prepared to teach English if or when asked to do so.

3.1 Implications for in-service training at university

So far, we assessed how English fits into the new curriculum; the training programs in South Korea; how Japanese teachers think about the introduction of English into elementary school; what they feel they need in their training, and what they are doing about it. Now, we are ready to make some suggestions for what universities can do.

3.2 The in-service training curriculum

Based on the reports of the cited studies, and from the writer's own experiences, the proposed training programs can be enacted from the following three areas (see Table 1.): *Language Development* --a large percent of the in-service training program should be dedicated to language improvement classes as studies cited in this paper suggest. In the beginning stages of training, the emphasis is on developing speaking and listening skills. Next is *Language Teaching Methodology*. This area is designed to give teachers assistance

in *what* kinds of practical activities to introduce and *how* to implement them. Additionally, although in a limited time frame, some attention is given for language teaching theories so that teachers can move along in their professional development in order to better understand and express *why* they are doing *what* they are doing in their classes. Finally, *Teaching practice* offers teacher demonstrations from invited peer and mentor elementary school teachers (specialists in teaching English in elementary school), as well as hands on practice by getting teachers to participate in simulated teaching lessons.

3.2.1 In-service training curriculum model

* Overall objectives:

To prepare teachers in their teacher development so that they can confidently and competently teach English in Elementary school, in accordance with the international understanding component of the new comprehensive study plan in 2002.

In carrying out these aims, the goal will be to develop the teachers overall English competence and to provide them with language teaching skills that are appropriate for elementary school students.

* Proposed Curriculum Model for In-service Training

In the proposed model below, the emphasis is mostly on building English language competence. In future training sessions, the curriculum can gradually be adjusted so that more time can be spent on teaching techniques and practice as teachers improve on their language development.

(Table 1.)

Contents	Time %
<u>Language Development</u> Classroom English Pronunciation Conversation Listening Sentence structure practice	80%
<u>Language Teaching Methodology</u> How to use textbooks How to use multimedia (E.g. videos, and Internet) Songs, games, role-plays Lesson planning Cultural understanding Language teaching theories	10%
<u>Teaching Practice</u> Lesson demonstration by outstanding teachers Lesson demonstrations by participants (Individually, pairs and in groups, team-teaching: practice with an ALT is also included)	10%

3.3 Delivery of in-service training model

English Department staff at universities and or invited language instructors can do English language instruction. In addition, staff and invited specialists from the elementary school community (e.g. teachers at university extension elementary schools (*Fuzoku*) or from previous selected pilot schools or others that have taught English) can offer instruction in teaching theory, methods, and techniques.

* Official support from local schools

Principals, Head Teachers and experienced English elementary school teachers are involved in the in-service training as advisors. Getting people at the local school level involved is crucial for making the program successful (Fullan, 1991, Markee, 1997).

* Term of training

Based on the survey report of Japanese teachers (see Ohshiro and Kanamori, 1999) it may be difficult to get teachers to come to longer, intensive 120 hour sessions during seasonal breaks as in Korea. Thus, this area needs to be researched further possibly by surveying teachers to see which type of schedule is preferable.

* Survey of teachers in the local area

The above model is a proposed one. In order to make the model more practical, the voices from teachers need to be heard. As previously mentioned, curriculum policies are effective if teachers are involved in the innovations. Thus, the first step universities should take is to survey teachers to get their views on what they feel they need. Data from the surveys in the studies listed in this paper from South Korea and Japan can be useful in formulating items for the survey.

3.4 Limitations on the proposed role of universities

One problem with universities offering training to the in-service teachers is that English is not a required subject to teach for elementary school teachers. Thus, the obvious limitation to universities playing a role in the English training of in-service elementary school teachers is the fact that there is no sense of immediacy. In short, presently elementary school teachers are not concerned about teaching English since it is not mandatory to teach it. In addition, they may want to avoid teaching English because they lack sufficient training needed to teach it. These are significant differences when we compare the situation to South Korea, where teaching English is mandatory and teachers have received training to teach the foreign language. Other concerns of Japanese teachers is that they may not want to deal with English because they feel they are too busy with other teaching responsibilities (Takaki and Laskowski, 1998), and that there is no room for teaching English in a curriculum that is already over-crowded. Moreover, budget constraints concerning costs for instructors and materials etc. could dampen efforts by universities to offer teaching training. These problems need to be explored further.

4. Conclusion

This study has reported on how the teaching of English in Elementary school fits into the *international understanding* component of new course of study. The ministry does not mandate the teaching of a foreign language. For example, English can be taught if a school decides to include it in their *international understanding* integrated courses. Without a mandate to teach English, it seems most schools and their teachers are not doing much about teacher training to prepare for the introduction of English. This is where universities, especially faculties of education can play a role. However, there is no precedent in Japan for offering English training to in-service elementary school teachers on a larger scale. For this we looked to South Korea and analysed the training curriculum teachers had and their responses to it. We then looked at the situation in Japan and what teachers feel they need in regards to their training. After evaluating the curriculum models in South Korea, and responses of teachers in both countries in regards to what they would like in their training, a proposed model for in-service training was suggested in this study. However, the study mentioned the limitations both teachers and universities face because the inclusion of English as a subject to teach is not mandatory in the new curriculum. But there seems to be a strong current coming from the media and comments from educators that suggest in the near future, English will be an eventual core subject in elementary school. In this sense 'the future is speeding toward us' and universities should be the leaders in helping teachers cope with the future winds of education.

Notes

- 1) Although the Ministry has not stipulated that English should be taught, in this study we will take the position that if a foreign language will be taught, it will most likely be English. This position is taken because of the stature of English as an international language (Kitao, 1996, Yano, 2001) and the fact that it is officially the foreign language that is taught in secondary schools.
- 2) Both *Fuzoku* schools and pilot schools have introduced English for several years. I have been told by several educational experts that since foreign languages have now been given an approval in the new curriculum, it may demonstrate a general trend of the Ministry to eventually mandate that English be taught as a core subject in the future revised curriculums. This makes the immediacy of providing in-service training even more necessary.
- 3) However, since the mid 1970's, schools in Korea have introduced English as an extracurricular activity after normal school hours by teachers who were interested in English. Thus, unlike Japan, there is already a large 'core' group of elementary school teachers who could help train teachers as mentors because they are familiar with teaching English (personal communication Dr.Mac-Ran Park, teacher trainer, Pukyong National University, Pusan).
- 4) ALTs are mostly part of the JET program: college graduates, under 30 years old, from native English speaking countries with no teaching experience. They are required to come to Japan for a three-year period and team teach with JTEs. Their presence at each school varies. Usually, an ALT will come to a school (mostly secondary schools) for several days, once or twice a month.
- 5) According to Ritsuko Nakata, Teacher Trainer & Author (2001), it is understood that the class teacher (HRT) will have the role to teach English. In addition, Nakata claims the Ministry is considering having junior high school English teachers teach in elementary schools. As reported previously in Korea the elementary school teachers were strongly against this idea.

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