Curricular Issues, Instructional Methodology and Teacher Training in Elementary Schools (Grades 1-3) in South Korea

Dr. Patricia Davis-Wiley
Professor, World Languages and ESL Education
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I. Introduction

Following the 1992 enactment of the 6th national educational curriculum in South Korea, English as a subject area became an integral component of the elementary school curriculum for grades 3 through 6. In fact, at this writing, it not only remains in place with the enactment of the 7th national educational curriculum, introduced in 1997, but it is an irrefutable testimony to the shift from Korea's closed educational system to an open educational system, moving from a "producer-centered educational system" to a "consumer-centered one" (Huh, 2007, p. 39). Indeed, with the globalization trend being fully launched in the new millennium, mastery of English, beginning in the 3rd grade, may very well enable South Korean students toward realizing the ideal of Hong-ik-in-gan—becoming well-educated global persons for the 21st century.

II. Theoretical Background

1. Curricular Goals and Linguistic Proficiency

Prior to addressing proposed teacher training, instructional models and curricular content to deliver English as part of the Korean elementary school curriculum, one must first project realistic linguistic goals (i.e., desired levels of second language proficiency to meet specific linguistic tasks) to be reached through the articulated (grades 3-6) English curriculum.

Linguistic proficiency is a multi-dimensional process (ACTFL, 2009; Correspondence scales, 2009), and is typically described in terms of arriving at a particular level of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) at which one can perform in a language (e.g., English) in context (Cummins, 1989), function (Cummins, 1984) and accuracy, when listening, speaking, reading and writing in the target language (see Figure 1).

South Korea’s 7th national curriculum includes English as a content area subject, taught as part of the elementary school day; it is not, however, the exclusive medium of delivery for part of or all other content areas (i.e., partial or full language immersion, as defined in Curtain & Dalhberg, 2004 and in Lenker & Rhodes, 2007). Thus, the curricular content to be offered, the mode for its instructional delivery, and the models for training teachers to deliver English as a subject area, will be discussed in this paper, within these parameters.

2. Time Required to Attain Proficiency

Acquiring a second language takes time and according to research conducted by the ILR or the Interagency Language Roundtable (formerly known at the Foreign Service Institute), and ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), in order to progress from Novice low/Level 0 (no functional proficiency) to Superior/Level 3 (ability to function effectively in most formal and informal settings), it will take hundreds of hours to reach a high level of proficiency, depending on the linguistic aptitude of the student, his/her native language and the target language studied (see Appendix A). In part, the level of proficiency expected for students in a second language program, such as Korea’s elementary English program, will logically determine the curriculum and instructional models to be followed.
III. Curricular Content

In order to identify the content, scope and depth of the English curriculum for grades 3-6, and the instructional strategies to be used, the specific goals of the program and the resources available (i.e., teachers, materials, fiscal support) to implement it, will be determining factors.

Is the main goal of the elementary English curriculum to expose 3rd through 6th graders to basic essential structures, sounds, thematic vocabulary, a bit of culture and expressions of courtesy in English? Or, is the goal to establish basic levels of English language proficiency that can be scaffolded into and articulated to English classes offered in the upper grades? If the latter is desired, then the English class needs to be content-based.

The literature reports a variety of content-based models (see Figure 2) that may be appropriate for the second language classroom, ranging from totally content-driven (where subject content is the vehicle for promoting language acquisition) to language-driven (where the second language is the medium for delivering content). In the middle of this content-based instructional continuum are “theme-based...modules” (Strykera & Leaver, 1997, p.3), that “may be drawn from the academic content of the school” (Stoller & Grabe, 1997, p. 83). Thus themes based on content from single subject areas (e.g., math or science) become the curricular focus for the English language class. Likewise, cross-curricular samplings from two or more of the other subjects (e.g., music and fine arts; math and science) may become themes and actually tie content material across the entire elementary school curriculum.
It is this theme-based model that this researcher feels would be the best fit for the elementary school English curriculum in Korea. An illustration of this would be a theme-based learning module in which mathematical operations, already previously taught in Korean in the math class, would be subsequently reinforced in the English class. Similarly, a science and math theme-based module would consist of English lessons in both subjects and reinforce, for example, the types/names of mammals, where they live on the Earth, how large they are and how much they weigh, and how fast they can move, for example. It is suggested that regular subject area teachers meet on a regular basis with the English class teacher(s) in the school, in order to ensure that the content covered in the English class is aligned with what has already been taught or what is concurrently being taught in the other subjects in the curriculum. This would even make team-teaching possible (with the English teacher working with the subject area teacher) and allow for teaching English across the curriculum outside of the physical confines of the English class.

Thus, there will be an equal emphasis in the English class on both second language and regular elementary curricular content, with the information presented in a context-enriched, subject area content-related way. The content material presented in the English class will be familiar to the students since they already have a personal experiential knowledge base for it; therefore, it will make sense to them. Shrum and Gilisaan (2005) stress that when language “…is introduced and taught in meaningful contexts… the learner [is able] to acquire competency in using language for real-world communicative purposes” (p.10). Krashen (1985b) corroborates this concept in his Input Hypothesis, which states that true language acquisition occurs when there is an active negotiation of meaning between speakers. The researcher (Krashen, 1985a) also stresses the importance of the language acquisition process taking place in a low-stress environment. According to Krashen and his Affective Filter Hypothesis, the propensity for learning is indirectly proportional to the level of stress encountered by the student. Thus, the more comfortable the student is, when involved in the learning process, the higher the potential level for achievement.

When building the English curriculum, it is most important that the 3rd through 6th graders’ stage of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969/2000) be addressed. Essentially, children between the ages of 7 and 11 are in their Concrete Operational Stage, according to Piaget. Therefore, the content and mode of instructional delivery both need to accommodate this developmental stage. At this period in their cognitive development, for example, children
are able to think logically about concrete objects and events, and can classify and order them. Therefore, the curriculum should allow for ample opportunities for the students to both explore and experiment (Bruner, 1967, calls this Discovery Learning), but give them concrete, hands-on experiences, using props and visual stimuli (i.e., models and timelines). When introducing new and/or complex content, special care must be taken to accommodate what Sweller (1988; 1999) calls cognitive load. This theory states that the more information that a person needs to hold in his or her head at one time, the more difficult it is to do this since he or she may be experiencing cognitive overload. It should be noted that even though children may be asked to perform a complex cognitive task in the English classroom, that may challenge them, using Discovery Learning will help them accomplish this. Giving them familiar examples, including already-know facts, drawn from their own knowledge base and personal experiences, will allow them to accommodate learning more complex ideas. Consequently, they will be more likely to remember this new information, discovered on their own.

Before moving on to instructional methodology issues in this paper, the following caveat regarding curricula and classroom support materials, must be considered. Even given the fact that curricula and teaching peripherals for teaching English in the elementary schools are readily available world-wide (a simple advanced google search will yield a plethora of unit and lesson plans, realia, teacher and student-friendly manipulatives, games and activities), the following is highly recommended by this researcher. It is absolutely essential to the success of the elementary English curriculum, that a carefully-selected cadre of native, classroom-seasoned English speakers, work closely with a diverse core (i.e., females, males, variety of ages and classroom experience) of highly-English proficient (see ACTFL guidelines for the Superior level of proficiency), Korean elementary school English teachers. This team will work together to craft a cognitively and developmentally-appropriate, meaningful, culturally-authentic, up-do-date, linguistically accurate (in form, function and context) curriculum.

III. Instructional Methodology

Meaningful content-based (context-based) instruction truly encourages students to use the second language from day one of the class. In order for this to happen, however, the vehicle for its instructional delivery must be developmentally and cognitively appropriate, be hands-on, highly interactive, allow for comprehensive exchange to occur (Krashen, 1985) in the L2, and incorporate authentic content materials from the target language culture (as mentioned above).

Teaching language through commands, Total Physical Response (Asher, 1982), through interactive story-telling (Total Physical Response Storytelling or TPRS, Ray & Seely, 1997) role-playing (Doughty & Pica, 1986) with authentic language (Burns & Joyce, 1997) and cultural situations, chanting, singing traditional children’s songs, reciting nursery rhymes, learning tongue-twisters (to practice English phonemes which are non-existent in Korean), and at times, dancing, are suggested right hemisphere activities that will motivate the children to practice the L2 and set them at ease as they begin to acquire a new language. (These same activities can be used in the Teacher Training Model presented later in this paper.)

The English class should be an open, brain-compatible, friendly, comfortable environment where children are allowed to actively practice, explore, interact and communicate in the target language. When this occurs not only do students learn but they retain both the content and the language better (see Figure 3).
According to the research, students perform best in language programs that “teach language through cognitively complex content, through problem-solving, discovery learning in highly-interactive classroom activities” rather than in programs which focus on “discrete units of language taught in a structured, sequenced curriculum” (Collier, 2007, p. 7). Ideally, then, English would be taught using a modified CBI (content-based instruction) approach (Strykera & Leaver, 1997), as described above. Thus, instruction of discrete points of grammar, non-curricular-related lists of disconnected vocabulary, and Language 1 to Language 2 translation activities, for example, should not constitute the content/core of the elementary school English curriculum. All instructional material needs to be relevant and always presented in context.

Given the fact that English is taught as a self-contained subject as part of the school day, in grades 3-6, and not as a medium of instruction for other subjects throughout the school day (i.e., partial or total immersion), the expected output levels of English proficiency attained at the end of 3 years of daily English classes will be quite different than if the school curriculum were taught exclusively through the second language. Realistic expectations for linguistic proficiency to be attained by the students, at the end of this program, are needed.

V. Teacher Training

The success of the elementary (grades 1-3) English program is contingent upon several factors: big picture planning (i.e., 5-year projections); close collaboration amongst all partners (i.e., the Ministry of Education; University faculty; school administrators, elementary school English teachers and curriculum coordinators; and native English-speaker teachers/resource personnel).

Having had the privilege of working with Chuncheon National University of Education for several years, beginning in 1996, in the Intensive English Language Institute offered there 2 weeks during the summers and winters, this researcher feels qualified to offer suggestions for a proposed Teacher Training model for elementary school teachers, based on her own extensive experience.

First, the curriculum for this program needs to be written to reflect curricular goals, the level of linguistic competence expected for the exiting 6th graders, and fiscal and personnel resources.

Second, there needs to be a strong liaison established between the local English Education faculty at the home University that will conduct regular training workshops, and the elementary school English teachers who will preferably already have an ACTFL level of Superior in English. To identify elementary school teachers who have less than this level of English
proficiency would necessitate this researcher to suggest another Teacher Training model other than the one which will be presented in this short paper.

Third, both the host university and the local elementary schools need to be willing to identify classroom-seasoned Native English-speakers (NES) who would work side-by-side in both the university setting and in the schools with the elementary school faculty. This cadre of NES personnel might already have a position at the university or need to be hired in concert by a liaison from both the university and the local schools. These NES are key in developing an appropriate content-enriched, elementary school curriculum, identifying appropriate instructional materials, and in serving as a NES resource to both university faculty and the elementary schools (see Figure 4).

Once the above has been accomplished, the issue of Teacher Training can be addressed. Given the natural breaks during the school year (summer and winter) in Korea, it seems logical that Teacher Training workshops take place during these times. Ideally, the elementary school English teachers would live on campus for 2 weeks, and live in residence halls with the NES who will be part of the instructional team at the university and in the schools. Workshop participants would agree to an *English Only* honor code whenever they are campus; this is essential to revitalize and ameliorate their level of spoken English proficiency.

The first week of the 2-week summer workshop would concentrate on crafting an appropriate content-based (subject-enriched English) curriculum, paying particular attention to full articulation from 3rd to 6th grade, following all of the considerations previously mentioned above in this paper. The second week of the workshop would allow time to work on spoken English proficiency, create instructional peripherals for the upcoming school year, and participate in digitally-taped micro teaching lessons, practicing components of the new curriculum. These taped lessons would be peer evaluated and become part of the participants' professional portfolios.
Prior to the winter on-campus workshop, a needs-assessment, identifying both problems and concerns, in addition to successes, would be conducted to ultimately inform the structure of the 2-week session. The curriculum could be modified, if need be, during the first few days, but most importantly, this winter session would allow all teachers to demonstrate successful teaching methods and share theme-based lessons, assessments, instructional materials and peripherals with one another. Instructional methodology used in the summer and winter workshops would ideally be the same used in the elementary school English classes.

During the school year, the elementary school English teachers would stay in close touch with the host university faculty via blogs, wikis, and podcasts, and perhaps during a fall and/or spring symposium on campus. During the school year, local schools could identify stellar elementary school students and showcase them either within their local group of schools and/or at the local host university.

VI. Discussion

This paper is just one of many that have been and probably will be written concerning the elementary school English program in Korea. It is a relatively new program, having been first implemented in 1996. Given the talent and expertise of Korea’s universities’ faculties, and the outstanding dedicated professionals who are the unsung heroes in the elementary schools, this researcher feels strongly that Korea’s elementary school English program will grow into a world-class second language program.

References


Correspondence of Proficiency Scales. Retrieved on September 12, 2009 from http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/languagelearning/ManagingYoungLearnersProgram/CorrespondenceOfProficiencyScales.htm


Appendix A

The Foreign Service Institute’s Data Regarding the Length of Time Needed to Acquire Linguistic Proficiency in a Second Language

**EXPECTED LEVELS OF ABSOLUTE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY IN LANGUAGES TAUGHT AT THE FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE**

| Group I: Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, French, Swedish, Haitian Creole, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swahili |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Length of Training*** | **Aptitude for Language Acquisition** |
| 8 weeks (240 hours) | Minimum: 1 | 1/1+ | 1+ |
| 16 weeks (480 hours) | 1+ | 2 | 2+ |
| 24 weeks (720 hours) | 2 | 2+ | 3 |

| Group II: Bulgarian, Dari, Farsi, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Malay, Urdu, German |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Length of Training*** | **Aptitude for Language Acquisition** |
| 16 weeks (480 hours) | Minimum: 1 | 1/1+ | 1+/2 |
| 24 weeks (720 hours) | 1+ | 2 | 2+/3 |
| 44 weeks (1320 hours) | 2/2+ | 2+/3 | 3/3+ |

| Group III: Amharic, Bengali, Burmese, Czech, Finnish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Cambodian, Lao, Nepali, Filipino, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Sinhala, Thai, Tamil, Turkish, Vietnamese |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Length of Training*** | **Aptitude for Language Acquisition** |
| 16 weeks (480 hours) | Minimum: 0+ | 1 | 1/1+ |
| 24 weeks (720 hours) | 1+ | 2 | 2+ |
| 44 weeks (1320 hours) | 2 | 2+ | 3 |

| Group IV: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Length of Training*** | **Aptitude for Language Acquisition** |
| 16 weeks (480 hours) | Minimum: 0+ | 1 | 1 |
| 24 weeks (720 hours) | 1 | 1+ | 1+ |
| 44 weeks (1320 hours) | 1+ | 2 | 2+ |
| 80-92 weeks (2400-2760) | 2+ | 3 | 3+ |

*The number of hours is the theoretical maximum at 30 hours a week.*