

Elementary School English Education

Two Influential Factors Found in Comparison of Japan and South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Compulsory elementary school English education for 5th and 6th grade students in Japanese elementary schools was introduced in April 2011. It is useful to compare Japan's experiences, situation and prospects in that regard with those of South Korea, where compulsory elementary school English education for 3rd through 6th grade students was introduced nationwide in 1997. This paper clarifies the problems and challenges of elementary school English education in Japan and compares them with those encountered in its introduction and successful implementation in South Korea. The paper then examines and compares how these problems were and are being dealt with in the two countries and considers the importance and impacts of socio-cultural and political influences operating in each country. After explaining why it is useful to compare English education in South Korea and Japan (section 1), the paper describes how the Korean government dealt with three major problems in Elementary school English education (section 2), then considers three related major problems Japan's program now faces (section 3) and points out (section 4) two factors, socio-cultural factor and political factor, which appear to account for some key differences in the two countries' situations and prospects for elementary school English education.

Key words: elementary school English education, Japan, South Korea, socio-cultural factor, political factor

小学校英語教育

－ 影響を与えた2要素を日韓比較に見る－

与那覇 恵子

要旨

今年度、2011年度から小学校において5年生、6年生を対象として英語が必修となる。筆者は日本より10年以上前に小学校英語教育を必修化した韓国との比較研究によって日本における小学校英語教育を考察してきた。本論文では、筆者自身の研究論文を含めた諸資料を参照しながら、現在の日本の小学校英語教育の問題点と必修英語導入時の韓国の小学校英語教育における問題点を具体化し、それらの問題にそれぞれの国がどのように対処してきたかを探るその過程の中から、対処や結果の違いを生み出した要素として2つの要素、文化社会面での要素と教育政策面での要素に関して実例を挙げて比較検証する。論文構成は第一章で何故韓国との比較調査なのかに関して3つの理由を挙げて述べ、第二章では韓国の小学校英語教育における3つの問題点とその対策・結果について、第三章では日本の小学校英語教育の3つの問題点とその現状に言及する。終章ではまとめとして、それぞれの国での小学校英語教育の成果の違いを生み出している要素として、文化社会面での要素と教育政策面での要素の2つを挙げ、これら2要素における問題克服がこれからの日本の小学校英語教育において必須であるとする。

キーワード: 小学校英語教育 日本 韓国 文化社会的要素 政治的要素

Introduction

After decades of debate, compulsory elementary school English education for 5th and 6th grade students in Japanese elementary schools was introduced nationwide in April 2011. However, debate continues with regard to English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools, and opinions vary widely within Japanese society, including public opinions and those in educational and political circles. The author has been studying elementary school English education in Japan since 19__ and comparing it with that of South Korea since 200__, initially from the perspective of motivation to learn English (Yonaha, 2008) then through comparative analyses of the English language textbooks of the two countries (Yonaha, 2010), and most recently from the perspective of 6th grader English language ability in both countries.

The objective of this paper is to compare elementary school English education in Japan with that in South Korea, with special attention to socio-cultural factors and educational policy.

I Why South Korea?

Reasons why it is appropriate to compare Japan's elementary school English education with that in South Korea include the following:

1. South Korea has more than ten years of recent experience with compulsory English education in elementary school (since 1997) and has dealt with many of the challenges Japan faces today.
2. The Japanese and Korean languages are linguistically similar in many ways and about equally distant from English.
3. English education in South Korea is a hot issue among Japanese educators who is concerned with English education. (Higuchi, 2008).

As for reason 1, a little background about the situation in South Korea at the time of when compulsory English education was introduced into elementary schools is appropriate. It was 1997 when the Korean government started its compulsory English education in elementary schools. Before that, in South Korea there had been much debate over the pros and cons of such education, and it was similar to the debate now going on in Japan (*Refer to page 13*). Those opposed to Korea's program expressed opinions such as these: "There are still many things to be improved in junior high school English education. Starting elementary school English education will not be a help for that." and "In the situation where children's understanding of the mother language is not yet sufficient, learning English will be a bother for them."

Some scholars objected that compulsory English education in elementary schools might facilitate "cultural subordination" to English speaking countries. (Higuchi 2008) Those in favor of compulsory English education in elementary schools, on the other hand, argued that "In order to deal with the global age, English education should be

strengthened” and that “The earlier they learn English, the better they can develop their English ability.”

In Japan, similar arguments can be heard. Saito (2005, pp.20) comments on the importance of developing children’s ability to use their mother language, Japanese, rather than English. Terajima (2005, pp.63) points out the possibility that learning English may lead Japanese to have views biased by the U.S.A. or Britain, what he calls “mental colonization”. Junior high school teachers reportedly often say “The priority is to solve the problems in junior high school English education rather than to start compulsory English education at elementary schools.” On the other hand, Japan’s advocates of elementary school English education insist that “The importance and necessity of English as a means of communication in the world is increasing, and elementary school English education is a trend of the world.” (Kawai 2005, p.6)

In a February 1995 “Korea Research” survey targeting parents, 68% of respondents supported compulsory English education in elementary schools, as did 80% of respondents (parents) in a May 1995 survey by the Korean Education Development Committee (“Kankoku Kyouiku Kaihatuin”). In Japan, similarly, 70% of respondents (parents) supported compulsory English education in elementary schools in survey carried out by Seikatu Jyoho Center (Nihon no Kyoiku Gakusyuu data, Soran, 2006). Considering that South Korea’s compulsory elementary school English education started from a situation similar to that in Japan is at present, it is useful for Japan to learn from the history of elementary school English education in South Korea.

Reason 2, the linguistic similarities between Japanese and Korean, is supported by the data in Table 1 and Table 2 below. Table 1 shows how hard it is and how much it takes to reach the advanced level for native speakers of English learning each of several languages.

Table 1: The degree of difficulty and time to study for a native speaker of English to learn a language.

Language	Difficulty category	Study time in weeks	Language	Difficulty categor	Study time in weeks
Arabian	4	44	Swahili	-	24
Chinese	4	44	Danish	-	24
Japanese	4	44	Dutch	-	24
Korean	4	44	Norwegian	-	24
Polish	3	44	Swedish	-	24
Greek	3	44	Romanian	2	24
Hebrew	3	44	German	2	20
Russian	3	44	Portuguese	1	24
Thai	3	44	French	1	20
Turkish	3	44	Italian	1	20
Indonesian	-	32	Spanish	1	20
Malay	-	32			

Category: Defense Language Institute Homepage, Shirai, 2008

*Difficulty increases from Category 1 to Category 4. Study time shows the number of weeks that native speakers of English need to reach the advanced level in an intensive course of 30 hours a week.

Table 2 shows the language distance from English to each language. The language distance measures the degree of similarity between two languages. If they are near (i.e., have low rank numbers), it is easy for a native English speaker to learn that language, if far, it is hard for a native English speaker to learn the language. The result of table 2 shows that both languages, Japanese and Korean, have the same distance from English, which means that Korean learners of English find it as hard to learn English as do Japanese learners of English.

Table 2: Language distance from English (5 as the furthest)

Rank	Language
1	Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese)
2	Slavic languages (Polish, Russian, Croatian, Serbian)
3	Chinese, Arabian, Indonesian, Malay
4	Vietnamese, Khmer
5	Japanese, Korean

Elder and Cavies, 1998

The third reason is presented by Higuchi (2008). One reason why compulsory English education is a hot issue among Japanese English educators is that English education seems to be more effective and successful in South Korea than in Japan, with South Korea showing good results on various measures. Table 3 shows TOEFL scores and the numbers of TOEFL examinees in Japan and South Korea in 1964-66, 1991-93 and 2001-03.

Table 3: TOEFL scores and numbers of TOEFL testees, Japan and South Korea, 1964-2003

year	Japan		Korea		Gap between J. & K.	
	Score	Examinees	Score	Examinees	Score	Examinees
1964~1966	482	1,710	461	291	+ 21	+ 1,428
1991~1993	490	260,513	504	110,232	- 14	+ 150,281
2001~2003	517	83,358	539	76,541	- 22	+ 6,816

TOEFL Mail Magazine and Honma, 2002

Midorikawa's comparative study of senior high school students' English ability (Midorikawa, 2006) also indicates that English education in South Korea is better than in Japan. The conclusions of her paper are that:

"Totally, South Korean high school students exceed Japanese high school students. South Korea had once been conducting its English education program following the Japanese government's guideline. However, with a big change in the 1990's, South Korea started to promote elementary English education focused on speaking with a communicative syllabus and carried out an English education policy from elementary school to senior high school. It has produced fruits of much effort in those ten years."

Benesse Kyoiku Kaihatu Center (see references) also claims, based on data from GTEC investigations in 2003 and 2006, that in South Korea the (TOEFL?) scores of 1st and 2nd year senior high school students in 2006 (who had experienced compulsory elementary school English education) were 45.1 points higher than the scores of those who took the exam in 2003 (who had not experienced compulsory elementary school English education).

II The Problems in English education and how they were dealt with in South Korea

II - 1 Three major problems pointed out by the South Korean government in 1995 and the government's responses to them

In a previous paper (Yonaha, 2008), the author of this article compared the then-

present situations elementary school English education in Japan and South Korea Table 4 below from that paper is included here as succinct background information.

Table 4: Elementary English education in Japan and South Korea

Japan	South Korea
local government or school control	national government control
not compulsory	Compulsory
implemented in 2002 as English activity	implemented in 1997 as compulsory subject
5~15 hours/year in the period for integrated study	34 hours/year for 3 rd & 4 th grades 68 hours/year for 5 th & 6 th grades
no authorized textbook	only one authorized textbook
Mainly team-teaching	homeroom teacher centered
no compulsory training for teachers	compulsory training for 120 hours
many assistant language teachers	not many assistant language teachers
no such obligation	English-only class once a week
listening-& speaking-centered, basically no teaching of reading and writing (in reality, more schools started teaching & writing recently)	listening-& speaking-centered but reading and writings should be taught in less than 10% of contact hours.(in reality more than that)

Gotoo, 2005; Kawazoe, 2005; Kimura, 2006; Kawai, 2004

In 1995, two years before its 1997 implementation of compulsory elementary school English education, the Korean government analyzed factors which impeded successful English education, in its report entitled “Promoting Internationalization by Foreign Language Education” (Higuchi, 2008). The three major problems cited in that report as failure factors were as follows:

1. Lack of teachers’ communication skills
2. Students’ low motivation to learn English
3. Inappropriate textbooks for cultivating communicative English

II – 2 Problem 1---Lack of teachers’ communication skills

Regarding problem 1, the Korean government obliged all elementary school teachers to have 120 hours of training consisting of 70% English conversation and 30% English teaching. After finishing that training, some teachers voluntarily have another 120 hours’ training for improving their English and English teaching (Kawazoe, 2005). When the author of this article visited South Korea two times to study elementary school English education, in 2006 and 2010, she observed classes taught by a homeroom teacher who had finished only the initial 120 hours’ training and classes taught by a teacher specialized in English who had finished all 240 hours’ training. It

was impressive that these teachers spoke very good English even though they had no experience of studying abroad. In a presentation at the 2010 JALT conference in Nagoya, Japan, Dr. Kim, Kee Ho of Korea University, Discussed English language education in Korea, focusing especially on early English education (Kim, 2010): He reported that the Korean government now provides “customized” training for elementary school teachers, so that a teacher who is poor in speaking English will receive training to improve speaking, a teacher who cannot write well in English will receive training to improve writing, and so on. It is clear that the Korean government has been dedicating substantial money and time to developing its training for teachers, to improve their communication skills in English and English teaching.

II－3 Problem 2--Students’ low motivation to learn English

What the government-identified in 1995 as Problem 2, the students’ low motivation to learn English, seems now to be a problem of the past. Koreans’ heated enthusiasm to learn English has been strong enough to have created what is now commonly called “English fever” (named after an October 2004 *Newsweek* article which also mentioned that the fever had grown stronger among Korean people after compulsory English education started at elementary schools.

“English Village” is one product of Korea’s “English fever.” It is a kind of theme park where visitors can learn English in an English-village-like environment and where all communication should be in English. Visiting the village in 2006, the present author was surprised at the vastness of the village and the number of native speakers who worked there. It covers 277,200 square meters with accommodations for 550 students a day. One hundred native speakers and 50 Korean English teachers work there and students improve their communication skills in English by visiting or staying there. (Yonaha,2006).

An article on “Japan knowledge” in “Yahoo! Dictionary” (Kamei 2007) comments on the background of “English Village” and also on the phenomenon of “English fever.” He says “In 2004 only, 16,000 students from elementary schools through high school went abroad to study English, includes college students more than 100,000 went abroad for this purpose. Since families in local areas moved to Seoul to have their children learn English, in order to stop such a flow of people, “English village,” where they can experience the world of English was set up”

In a comparative study conducted in 2008 the author of this article found that “Korean 3rd and 6th graders have higher instrumental motivation than Okinawan 3rd and 6th graders, which means that Korean 3rd and 6th graders consider English more important for their future life and career than Okinawan 3rd and 6th graders do.” (Yonaha,2008)

II - 4 Problem 3--Inappropriate textbooks for cultivating communicative English

In a previous publication (Yonaha 2010), the present author compared Korean-government-approved Korean English language textbooks and the Japanese Ministry of Education approved English language textbooks “Eigo Note I” and “Eigo Note II”. The South Korean textbooks include many more communicative activities than the Japanese textbooks do. In addition, South Korean textbooks include chants and songs in every lesson, to practice a targeted English sentence. “Eigo Note I” and “Eigo Note II” used some pages to introduce other languages and to promote multicultural understanding, while Korean textbooks maintain a focus and greater emphasis on helping students to develop and improve their English language communication skills. In the Eigo notes series, most words are nouns whereas in Korean textbooks a greater variety of parts of speech are used. Thus the Korean textbooks seem better organized, higher in level, and are more clearly focused on developing communication skills.

III The problems of English education and how they were dealt with in Japan

In a previous publication regarding (Yonaha 2008), the present author points out the following problems of elementary school English education in Japan, all of which were shared by South Korea at the time it started its compulsory English education in its elementary schools in 1997:

1. Lack of teachers who can teach English at elementary schools
2. Absence of a uniformed textbook and concrete guideline
3. Inconsistency between elementary school and junior high school in curriculum

As for problem 1, lack of teachers who can teach English at elementary schools, it may be natural since there were no English classes for elementary school teachers when English was introduced in these schools. South Korea had found it necessary to provide special training for elementary school teachers, to prepare them to teach English to elementary school children. In Japan, however, the government has had no concrete plan to provide such training. In South Korea, English classes are taught mainly by homeroom teachers who have finished basic training for teaching English or by what they call *Senka* teachers who had more such training and specialize in teaching English. In Japanese (elementary?) schools, a popular way to teach English is to have a homeroom teacher and an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) or volunteer English teacher team-teach (Matsukawa, 2006). In Japan, in classes observed by the author, an ALT or volunteer English teacher mainly led the class, whereas in South Korea the homeroom teacher or *Senka* teacher personally led the class.

Because of problem 2, the absence of a uniform textbook and concrete curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, English education in Japanese elementary

schools varies in its methods and contents according to each local government or school. Only in 2010 did the Japanese Ministry of Education issue two English language textbooks for the 5th and 6th grades, “Eigo note I” and “Eigo note II.” They are used experimentally at some elementary schools at present, however, the author considers these textbooks weak for cultivating communicative skills in English, especially compared to South Korea’s approved English language textbooks.

Regarding problem 3, lack of consistency between elementary schools’ and junior high schools’ teaching of English, since there is no concrete curriculum to connect or coordinate them in Japan, each school has a different English teaching curriculum, as pointed out in *Shogakko eigo gakusyu shido shishin* (Itoh, 2004). As a result, junior high school English teachers often have new students who have very different levels and areas of English knowledge when they enter junior high school English courses. In South Korea, in 1997 the government had established an English education curriculum which required coordinated classes from elementary school through senior high school (Gotoh, 2005).

IV Two factors which make difference between Japan and South Korea

It is clear that Japan and South Korea faced the same problems in elementary school English education. However, even though nearby South Korea has a longer history of compulsory elementary school English education, it seems that Japan has not learned from South Korea’s experience or considered the effective measures taken by that government. Two sets of factors, one socio-cultural and the other political, seem to explain much of the difference between the approaches taken in Japan and South Korea.

IV-1 Socio-cultural factor

From the socio-cultural perspective, the following comment by Aihara (2002) suggests an important aspect of Japanese society: “In Japanese society, objectives are not clarified, actions are slow to be taken and the decisions are not made. It is a society where solutions to problems are postponed.” Korean students studying in Japan have made similar comments, noting for example that “Japanese people do not speak directly as Korean people do” and that when asked their opinions Japanese students often reply “I don’t know.” or just smile silently. These comments by two Korean students are supported by the book *Hashi to chokkara* by Yim Young-cheo and Ide Risako (2004). Below is an excerpt.

Different from Korean, Japanese greetings have many ambiguous expressions such as “Doomo” or “Doozo” in which adverbs are used only by themselves and other words are omitted. The Korean language does not have as many ambiguous expressions as Japanese and its expressions are direct. (I unna, 1995) As I Unna points out, generally the Korean way of speaking is clear and direct, and is called “*to-mei na gengo*”, language which has high transparency, while the Japanese way of speaking is polite but ambiguous, and it is said to be hard to figure out what the speaker really wants to say.

Such ambiguity in Japanese society or culture is shown in the objective in the guideline for elementary school English education:

外国語を通じて、言語や文化について体験的に理解を深め、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り、外国語の音声や基本的な表現に慣れ親しませながらコミュニケーション能力の素地を養う。(Ooshiro/Naoyama 2008)

Through foreign language to deepen the understanding of language and culture experientially and to strive for an education marked by an attitude to try to communicate positively. It is to cultivate the groundwork for communicative competence while having students become familiar with basic expressions and pronunciation of a foreign language.

“To strive for an education marked by an attitude to try to communicate positively” is hard to understand since it is hard to define or evaluate “attitude to try to communicate positively” in the STEP interview test, the interview to examine oral communication ability in English in STEP(Eiken in Japanese). The expression “the groundwork for communicative competence” is also ambiguous when compared to “English necessary for daily life” in the following excerpt from the South Korean guideline:

To cultivate basic communication skills which enable children to understand and use English necessary for items for daily life. To have children accept foreign cultures and at the same time to deepen their own country’s understanding to introduce it to foreigners. (Kimura2008)

The author finds such a concreteness in the objective and functioning of Korea’s “English village.” In this connection the Gyeonggi Province governor, Sohn Hakkyu, speaks of the objectives of the “English village”:

Gyeonggi Province is putting its heart and soul into cultivating men and women of ability who can lead Korea in this era of global and information oriented society. One way we are doing this is through the Gyeonggi English Village. This project is helping to foster our human resources with workers who have excellent English skills and international awareness. (Yonaha,2006)

In the homepage of “Gyeonggi English village”, one can read about the village’s goals: “improvement of international competitiveness” and “to be the leading country in the Asian economy.” In the same homepage, another objective clearly says, “contribution to foreign currency savings by studying English without going abroad.” In Japan, it seems rare to have educational goals connect with economic issues and to express this so directly. What *KBS World* broadcasted about “English village” also expresses such a directness. It says one of English village’s objectives was to stop the flow of money abroad. It cited the fact that from January to May in 2004, 891 million dollars were sent abroad for studying English or training in English.

Ambiguity in Japan is sometimes called for to maintain *wa* (peace); however, it is cumbersome when a concrete objective needs be set and quick action taken.

IV－2 Political factor

Another difference between Japan and South Korea is the attitude of politicians. Some comments by two former presidents of South Korean leaders show their concreteness and consistency in educational policy:

In terms of the infrastructure of globalization, to improve our ability to absorb information from abroad and to expand our role as a leading nation of the world, it is necessary to learn a foreign language.

(Former President Kim Young Sam, quoted in Higuchi 2008)

Without mastering English, the international language in the age of the Internet, Koreans cannot win in this global competition..

(Former President Kim Dae Jung, quoted in Kawazoe 2005)

The attitudes of Japanese politicians toward elementary school English education have been inconsistent. For example, in 2004, Minister of Education Kawamura stated that compulsory English education in primary school should be promoted, whereas in 2006 his successor, Minister Ibuki, said that it is not necessary to have compulsory English education in elementary school.

Beyond inconsistency in policy, an absence of politicians' concrete actions is also a problem, as Yamada (2008) notes:

English education with ambiguous objectives drags on for many years. Even though some little remedies are repeated occasionally, a substantial reform has not been made. I'm afraid that Japanese English education lacks its political perspective for a long time.

Even though South Korea's presidential system may facilitate stronger leadership than Japan's parliament/prime minister system, Japan should have more consistent and stronger leadership in English education policy.

V Conclusion

If Japan's schools are to effectively implement the compulsory English education in elementary schools that began in 2011, she could benefit greatly from the experiences of South Korea which has been effectively implementing such education since 1997. Linguistic similarities between Japanese and Korean make for similar difficulties in teaching and learning English in the two countries. South Korea in the mid-1990s faced many of the same obstacles to such education as Japan does now, and evidence indicates that she has largely and systematically overcome them in ways that Japan should be able to adapt to Japan's current situation.

Japan does differ from Korea in some ways that are reflected in special obstacles to effective implementation of elementary school English education in Japan. Japan's socio-cultural preference for ambiguity and indirectness, for maintaining *wa*, are reflected in the ambiguity of the objectives set for Japan's English education program. And beyond whatever effects Japan's parliament/prime minister system may have in inhibiting strong leadership, inconsistent and shifting policies toward English education and a lack of substantial supporting actions on the part of the Japanese government do not bode well for the future for English education in Japan's elementary schools.

At the recent 8th Asia TEFL conference held in Vietnam, the ardent enthusiasm of other Asian countries for elementary school English education was abundantly evident, while Japan's now-mandated program may remain mired in ambiguity, weak commitment, inaction, and arbitrary rather than evidence-based decisions. A recent article by Professor Allen Tamai Mutue of Japan's Aoyama Gakuin University expresses what can be concluded from the binational comparative analysis reported in this paper:

The elementary school English education in Japan lags way behind. I have a sense of crisis, a feeling of impatience, and a sense of despair about it. TPP is an issue of debate now, and there are some Japanese companies where

English is used as a means of communication. We are living in such a globalized world and I'm afraid Japanese children will be left behind the times. (Allen Tamai Mutue, Okinawa Times, 2011, Jan.4)

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