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## Language Planning in Korea: The New Elementary English Program

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In teaching English, the emphasis should be laid not on accuracy but on successful communication and fluency, not on rote memory but on the acquisition of the language through actual use of it (Ministry of Education of Korea, Elementary English Curriculum [Lee, 1995]).

The dominant role of English in current international trade and computer communication makes English teaching and learning an important issue in the educational systems of many non-English speaking countries. Over the last decade, English proficiency has been actively promoted by the governments of many ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a first language) countries striving to achieve modernization and internationalization (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1995). A government's wish to equip its citizens with improved English proficiency prompts many non-English speaking countries to introduce English education at an early age. It is reported (Ko, 1993) that English is an optional subject at the elementary level in over 50 countries, 25 of which have made it a mandatory school subject. For example, China starts English education from Grade 4, Thailand from Grade 1, France from Grade 2, Norway from Grade 3, and Israel from Grade 3 (Ministry of Education, 1997).

As Tollefson (1989) notes, in many non-English speaking countries, a learner's acquisition of English can be profoundly affected by a government's

policy toward the role of English in the society and also by the procedure for implementing those decisions in its educational system. The formation of language policy for English teaching, however, often involves a tension between the desire to preserve a country's own culture and language and the desire to promote English proficiency (Olshtain, 1989). While English is a language to be mastered for social, economic, and political success, it may also threaten the local culture, local languages, and local educational systems (Phillipson, 1992). The tension around the formation of language policy for English teaching is particularly evident in an elementary English program, because these years are the formative period for establishing a student's first language proficiency and identity.

This chapter presents the findings of an investigation of issues in the planning and implementation process of Korea's new elementary English program. Through interviews with policymakers, case studies of three local elementary schools, and documentary analysis, we investigated how the government's language education policy is perceived and implemented by teachers, and what impact the policy has on the culture of elementary education in Korea.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW ELEMENTARY ENGLISH PROGRAM

In Korea, English as a major foreign language has been taught as a regular subject in middle school (from Grade 7 to 9) and High school (Grade 10 to 12) since 1945 (Kim, 1997). There has been constant criticism of this curriculum, however, focusing as it did on the teaching of grammar and reading for higher education (Ministry of Education, 1993). In 1994, a year after its inauguration, the seventh Korean government began a nationwide campaign aimed at globalization of the country, with a view to enhancing Korea's rapid economic growth and internationalization (Ministry of Education, 1997). To achieve this goal, the Presidential Committee for Globalization Policy decided to first reform foreign language education in schools, particularly English education (Ministry of Education, 1997). When implementing its globalization policy, the government acknowledged that the existing English program did not contribute to developing the students' oral English proficiency, a language skill considered necessary to cope with extensive international communication with other countries (Ministry of Education, 1997).

Against this background, the Korean government decided to create a new elementary English program with a view to shifting the existing middle and secondary English programs to a more oral communication-based English program and to encourage the development of students' oral

English ability from an earlier age (Ministry of Education, 1997). In March, 1997, the Korean government thus launched the new elementary English class as a compulsory subject in every public elementary school. Although English has been taught as an extracurricular subject in elementary schools since 1982 (Chun, 1995), the government initiative marked the first mandatory implementation in the public elementary schools of a regular English class with a national English curriculum and textbooks. Prior to its inauguration, the Korean government spent two years developing a national curriculum, providing English teacher training for elementary teachers, organizing multimedia facilities for the schools, and publishing textbooks in readiness for the program's implementation (Ministry of Education, 1997).

According to the national curriculum, students are to learn English from Grade 3 to Grade 6 for two periods (90 minutes in total) per week. The aim of the elementary English program is "to motivate a student's interest in English and to develop basic communicative competence" (Ministry of Education, 1996): "When teaching English, the emphasis should be laid not on accuracy but on successful communication and fluency, not on rote memory but on the acquisition of the language through actual use of it" (Lee, 1995). The new curriculum particularly emphasizes the development of oral English ability to avoid repeating the problems with grammar- and reading-based English teaching in the established middle and secondary English program. Thus, according to the curriculum, during the first year of the English program (Grade 3), students learn English exclusively through listening and speaking activities. The alphabet is not introduced until Grade 4 and written English constitutes only 10% of the Grade 4 curriculum. In Grades 5 and 6, students learn reading and writing, but written English is introduced only as a supplement to spoken English (Ministry of Education, 1997). The government further imposes strict restrictions on the number of the words and length of sentences to be mastered in each grade, so that students can enjoy the English class without the burden of "studying" English. The specific schedule for implementation of the program was as follows (Ministry of Education, 1996):

March 1, 1997: Grade 3—listening and speaking (100 words; 7 words in a sentence).

March 1, 1998: Grades 3 and 4—listening, speaking, and reading (add 100 words; 7 words in a sentence).

March 1, 1999: Grades 3, 4 and 5—listening, speaking, and reading (add 150 words; 9 words in a sentence).

March 1, 2000: Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (add 150 words; 9 words in a sentence).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The implementation of the new English elementary program provides fertile ground for research. We were interested in investigating the relationship between government policy on the one hand, and its implementation by teachers and administrators on the other. We were also interested in the sociocultural impact of the program on the educational system more broadly. For this purpose, we chose three schools in the greater Seoul area for case study analysis, and arranged to interview key policymakers who have been involved in planning and implementing the program. To conduct the research, Jung made two visits to Korea from May to June 1998 and September 1998 to January 1999. During this period, the new elementary English program was being implemented in Grades 3 and 4.

Prior to research in the schools, Jung examined government documents related to educational policy for the elementary English program, and then interviewed four people in the Ministry of Education, three university professors involved in policy development and teacher training, and the principals of three schools, referred to as School A, School B, and School C. Jung then administered a preliminary questionnaire to teachers teaching English in Grades 3 and 4 in these three schools. This laid the groundwork for a subsequent interview with the teachers, 17 of whom participated in the interview (see Table 12.1). Data have been translated into English.

In her second visit, Jung then conducted 20 hours of classroom observation of the teachers who participated in the interview. After each observation, Jung conducted a short informal interview with the teachers. In the final stage of the research, Jung administered a second questionnaire to all English teachers in each school to verify the results of preliminary questionnaires and to identify common issues among the teachers. Table 12.2 shows the number of questionnaires collected from English teachers in the final stage of the research.

Data from these questionnaires is the basis for analysis in the "Discussion" section below. Note that the two questionnaires from School A were completed by the English special teachers, but the number of teachers interviewed in School A included the two English special teachers as well as two regular classroom teachers. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.

TABLE 12.1  
Grade 3 and 4 Teachers Interviewed

	<i>School A</i>	<i>School B</i>	<i>School C</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of teachers	4	6	7	17

TABLE 12.2  
Second Questionnaires Completed by Grade 3 and 4 Teachers

	<i>School A</i>	<i>School B</i>	<i>School C</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of Qs	2	7	20	29

### ISSUES IN GOVERNMENTAL LANGUAGE PLANNING

In interviews with policymakers, we found that there were three questions of central concern. First, who would teach English to the elementary students? Second, how could an oral-based curriculum be implemented? Third, what sociocultural impact would the new elementary English program have on students? We will discuss each of these issues in turn.

#### The Training of English Teachers

When the new elementary English program was initiated, there was much concern about the English qualifications of elementary school teachers (*The Chosunilbo*, 1996). The government's position was that elementary teachers should teach elementary English, because such teachers are familiar with the characteristics of elementary students (Ministry of Education, 1997). However, given the Korean context, where even certified secondary English teachers have had difficulty teaching oral English in their classrooms (Ministry of Education, 1993), there was concern that elementary teachers who did not major in English would have even greater difficulty teaching conversational English to their students. In response to this concern, the government planned to provide extensive English teacher training for every elementary teacher by 2000. This training would comprise 120 hours of general teacher training in English and an additional 120 hours of intensive training for those who excelled in the general program. It was hoped that some of those teachers who received the intensive training might become English special teachers in the future. The training included English conversation classes with English native speakers, teaching methods, materials development, and presentation of teaching (Ministry of Education, 1996). Tables 12.3 and 12.4 show the number of teachers the government planned for both stages of English teacher training.

In addition, since 1997, the government has increased the number of students who specialize in English at the nine national teacher universities (by February 1998, 890 students; by February 2000, 933 students) and has also increased the hours of English instruction in the curriculum. Every student in the university program for elementary teachers is required to take 12 credits of English classes (previously six credits) and students who

**TABLE 12.3**  
Teachers Planned for General English Teacher Training

	1996	1997	1998	1999	Total
Number of teachers	18,886	18,654	18,390	12,046	67,976

(Source: Ministry of education, 1998a)

**TABLE 12.4**  
Teachers Planned for Intensive Teacher Training

	1996	1997	1998	1999	Total
Number of teachers					

(Source: Ministry of education, 1998a)

specialize in English have to take 21 English credits (Ministry of Education, 1998a). Further, as of 1998, elementary teachers must pass an English conversation test in order to be considered eligible for employment at elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 1998b).

The government's plan for the new program was to allow two different English teacher systems: the classroom English teacher system and the English special teacher system. In the classroom English system, the regular classroom teacher is responsible for teaching English 90 minutes per week; in the English special teacher system, a single teacher is responsible for teaching English to a number of different classes each week. For English classes in Grades 3 and 4, the government recommended the classroom English teacher system in which each classroom teacher teaches English to his or her students, while for English classes in Grades 5 and 6, the government recommended the English special teacher system (Ministry of Education, 1998a). However, the government permitted principals to choose the system deemed best for their own particular needs and circumstances. Table 12.5 shows the distribution of English teacher systems across Grades 3 and 4 in 1998.

### Teaching Methodology

Policymakers were concerned that the large elementary classes (approximately 40–48 students) would make communicative language teaching difficult. To compensate for the large number of students and to promote the oral English program, the government encourages the use of multimedia systems (VCR, large TV monitor, CD-ROMs) and has funded the installation of these systems in each class from Grade 3 (Ministry of Education, 1997). The government has also included diverse communicative language

**TABLE 12.5**  
The English Teacher System in Grades 3 and 4 in 1998

	<i>Grade 3</i> <i>Number of Schools</i>	<i>Grade 4</i> <i>Number of Schools</i>
English special teacher	859	882
Classroom teacher	4,235	4,257
Other system (e.g. exchange teaching)	483	448
Total	5,577	5,587

(Source: Ministry of education, 1998b)

teaching methods in the teacher training and encouraged teachers to use a variety of hands-on activities, such as games, songs, chants, and arts. The government has developed a series of multimedia textbooks, accompanied by audio tapes, videotapes, and a teachers' guide. To improve the quality of English textbooks, the government introduced an open competition among publishers and has listed textbooks from 12 companies on an approved list from which local schools may choose (Ministry of Education, 1997).

### **The Sociocultural Impact of the Elementary English Program**

Policymakers' third concern about the elementary English program was whether it could affect students' development of the Korean language and their Korean identity. Lee's (1992) research suggests that many people believe if a foreign language is introduced in Grade 3, the development of literacy in Korean may suffer. Lee also found concern that an early English program could promote a preference for English or American culture among students. In response to these concerns, the government, through its marketing materials, emphasized the particular importance of English as an international language, rather than just one of many foreign languages. The government has taken the position that early foreign language learning can promote a deeper appreciation of Korean culture alongside an understanding of other cultures: "By exposure to foreign language education at an earlier age, students can easily differentiate between the Korean and foreign language and it gives students a greater sensitivity about the Korean language" (Ministry of Education, 1996).

### **ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION: THREE CASE STUDIES**

Having examined the central issues identified by policymakers of the new elementary English program, we now turn to our case studies of the three schools in the greater Seoul area. In each of the case studies, we provide

details of the school site, its population, institutional support for the English program, and teacher perceptions of the English program.

**School A.** School A, with approximately 1800 students, is situated in a middle-class neighborhood in a suburban city near Seoul. The school, opened in 1992 as the new suburban residential areas emerged, now has 52 teachers (22 male and 30 female) with an average age of 43. During the research period, there were seven classes in each of Grades 3 and 4, with an average of approximately 42 students in each class. This school has opted for the English special teacher system; thus two English special teachers teach Grades 3 and 4 respectively. It was these two teachers, Yang Kyung and Soo Jin, that Jung interviewed. According to one of the regular classroom teachers interviewed, the principal deferred to the teachers in Grades 3 and 4 in making this decision:

Our principal is quite democratic in administering the school policy. He asked us to decide the English teachers' system in our teachers meeting. We were talking about different options like combining the classroom teacher system and English special teacher system in the same grade if many teachers want to teach, but then classroom teachers became concerned they could be compared to English special teachers by the parents and students, so we decided to stick to the English special system (Min Hee, 1998).

Both English special teachers were female and both said they volunteered as English special teachers. One of the English special teachers, Yang Kyung (48 years old), who was teaching Grade 4, had been teaching English as an extracurricular subject since 1982 and during the research period was the president of the district elementary English teachers association. In contrast to Yang Kyung, the other teacher, Soo Jin, was a very young teacher (24 years old) undertaking elementary English teaching for the first time in 1998. Because of their differences in age and teaching experience, Soo Jin tended to follow Yang Kyung's direction for English teaching and they cooperated through active participation in the district elementary teachers association meetings. Yang Kyung completed the general and the intensive teacher training, while Soo Jin completed 120 hours of general teacher training. Compared to other teachers' classroom hours (30 per week), English special teachers in this school had fewer hours (20), allowing them to devote more time to lesson preparation. Soo Jin seemed to be happy with her working conditions: "I was interested in English so I volunteered as English teacher this year to have more time to study English. I enjoy my working conditions right now because compared to classroom teachers I have more time to prepare the class and to focus on materials development" (Soo Jin, 1998).



In 1997, the district school board allotted approximately \$25,000 to every school to install a multimedia system in a special English room. Thus each class in Grades 3 and 4 was equipped with a multimedia system (large TV monitor, VCR, and recorder) and the school also had a special English room equipped with 30 monitors connected through the local area network (LAN), a 40-inch monitor, overhead projector, and multimedia projectors. Students could watch videotapes and CD-ROMS on each monitor right at their desks.

The principal's attitude towards the English program is generally supportive, but he does not want to treat English as a special subject: "I think the English subject should be considered as one of the subjects in the elementary school curriculum, but nothing more. I believe the current enthusiasm about English will be diminished after English becomes routine (principal, School A, 1998). Three of the four teachers interviewed in School A said that their colleagues generally expressed two distinct attitudes towards the English program. While they did not welcome the new English program because of the possibility of an increased workload, they still wanted to receive the English teacher training, if available, because they saw it as directly related to their career development. These contrasting views are expressed by Soo Jin and the principal, respectively:

Having another subject always bugs teachers in terms of workload as well as their ability to teach. We have to acknowledge that not every teacher is positive about the introduction of the English program (Soo Jin, 1998).

In the current situation, teachers feel that they should invest their time in learning English and computer skills, because without knowledge of English and the computer, they know they cannot survive in the educational field (principal in School A, 1998).

In terms of the classroom implementation of the program, both English special teachers made it clear that the purpose of their teaching was "to promote students' interest in learning English and confidence in English." To achieve their goals, they tried to introduce different kinds of activities, such as role-plays, games, songs, chants, and story telling in their classes:

In our textbook, each unit consists of four hours. In the first hour, I usually start with greetings and asking about the weather; at other times I introduce songs and chants to capture the students' attention. Then we watch the videotape as a topic presentation. In the second hour, we do the role-play with the sentences we learned from the videotape and practice them with songs and chants. In the third hour, I introduce a game and other activities to reinforce what was learned. In the fourth hour, I check students' listening ability through worksheets (Soo Jin, 1998).

I introduce many story-telling activities in my class. Because we have 30 monitors in the English room, students listen to the story while watching it on the monitors (Yang Kyung, 1998).

Both teachers said that students enjoyed the English class. Since there is no evaluation of English as a subject and most of the English classes consist of hands-on activities, students were free from the sense of "studying" English. The teachers reported that about 70–80% of their students achieved the daily objectives of the English class. The most popular activity among the students was the "game" activity, which introduced a strong motivation for participation and fostered a sense of achievement. While students enjoyed these activities, Soo Jin said students are sometimes too excited to remember the purpose of the games: "Students just try to have fun, not considering the words they have to practice" (Soo Jin, 1998). Both teachers said they normally followed the sequence of the textbooks, but sometimes they changed the sequence of activities according to the students' interests. They relied on many other resources to vary the activities and also gathered ideas from local elementary teachers association meetings.

**School B.** School B, with 1027 students, is located in a new middle- and upper-middle class apartment complex in a new city about 40 minutes from Seoul. The school first opened in 1994 and currently has 34 teachers (24 female and 10 male). Compared to School A, most teachers are relatively young (an average age of 35); 13 of the 34 teachers were new college graduates at the time of this research. The average class size in School B (48 students) is larger than School A (42 students), because this area has had rapid population growth. School B opted for the classroom English teacher system, because no one volunteered as an English special teacher. More than half of the teachers (four of seven) said that they were assigned to Grade 3 and 4 by the principal because they had completed teacher training. They did not volunteer for these positions.

With four classes each in Grades 3 and 4, and two Grade 3 English classes taught by the same classroom teacher, (because one teacher did not want to teach an English class), the total of seven classroom English teachers had an average age of only 26 years, except for one teacher who was 48 years old. The addition of English as a subject resulted in the Grade 3 and 4 teachers teaching two hours more than other teachers. Due to this increased workload, most of these positions were assigned to younger teachers. There was also a common perception among the teachers that the younger teachers were more proficient in English than the older teachers because they had better pronunciation skills. Jung found that this phenomenon was quite

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common across the schools; she observed that younger teachers were better represented than older teachers at workshops and seminars related to English teaching.

Among the seven classroom English teachers, five teachers received the general English teacher training, one teacher received both general and intensive training, and one senior teacher expected to receive the training in the coming winter vacation. Several teachers complained that there were not many opportunities for English teacher training even though they wanted it. As Hyun Jin said: "I have been waiting for the chance for intensive English teacher training since last summer, but I still haven't had the chance" (Hyun Jin, 1998).

This school has one teacher (Jung Ah) who majored in English and who generally prepared class presentations for parents and distributed the teaching materials to other teachers. In School B, she was the only teacher who participated in the local elementary teachers association. She was teaching Grade 3 as a classroom teacher in 1998, but she had worked as the English special teacher for Grade 3 in 1997. However, because of job conditions she did not apply for the English special teacher position in 1998. As she explained below:

In this school, there is no space for special teachers. We have to stay in the teachers' office and I have to help with school administration work, because my teaching hours are fewer than other classroom teachers. Except for 20 hours teaching, I have to type documents all day. There is no place to put my teaching materials and I really want to have my own classroom. If the government wants to promote English special teachers, I think they should provide the appropriate working conditions for special teachers (Jung Ah, 1998).

Because of the shift from the English special teacher system in 1997 to the classroom teacher system in 1998, most of the teachers in Grade 4 had to teach English without the prior experience of teaching Grade 3 English. This created a greater burden for these Grade 4 teachers. As Hyun Jin and Young Mai said:

In my case, I was assigned to Grade 4 at the end of February, and had to begin teaching English from the first week of March. Because I didn't teach English last year and there were no materials at all, I had to make everything. And I didn't have that much time (Hyun Jin, 1998).

I couldn't guess how much students already knew and what they had already learned (Young Mi, 1998).

Three classrooms in Grade 3 were equipped with multimedia systems. The Grade 4 classrooms were to be ready in 1999. Like School A, School B also has a special English room, funded by the school board, with

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computers, English books, audio listening, and a role-playing area. Jung found, however, that because this school does not have an English special teacher, the English room was not managed very efficiently. Jung Ah was responsible for the special English room, but as a classroom teacher, she said she did not have much time to manage this additional room: "Right now, nobody is really in charge of this room and I am not the person. I am just a person to keep the key" (Jung Ah, 1998). Most of the teachers taught English in the room at least once per week, but some teachers did not want to use the space because they thought that students did not concentrate well there: "I normally go when I want to try different CDs related to the textbook, and students always think that room is a place for playing, not for studying" (Hwa Sun, 1998).

The principal was generally supportive of the English program. Five of the seven teachers said that the principal funded the development of materials if requested. The principal said, however, that he would prefer to have English special teachers because of the many individual differences in English ability among the classroom teachers. In terms of teachers' cooperation, unlike School A, teachers in School B did not have much communication with other English teachers because of their heavy workload as classroom teachers and the lack of a head teacher. The only time they did meet teachers in the same grade was on a Friday afternoon, but there were always issues other than English to deal with at that time.

It would be much better if we can have more chance to exchange teaching ideas and materials. But our life here is so busy, because this school has a short history and fewer teachers than other schools (Jin Sook, 1998).

Perhaps there is no teacher confident in English teaching. We have communication for other subjects, not for English (Dong Hee, grade 4 teacher, 1998).

Among class activities, Jung found that the CD-ROM activity was the most popular in School B. Teachers said that most of the students were very accustomed to handling CD-ROMs because of their high socioeconomic status. Regarding use of the textbook, while four of seven teachers said that they restructured the textbook according to students' interest, three teachers said they simply followed the sequence of the textbook.

**School C.** Opened in 1937, School C is an old inner city school of 2,335 students located in the northern downtown area of Seoul. Because of its location, the socioeconomic status of most parents is low; most families depend on the school exclusively for their children's education. In other words, unlike schools A and B, students in School C do not have access to extracurricular schooling and academic support. Most of the 72 teachers in the school are very experienced. With an average age of 39 years, about

80% of the teachers have more than 10 years teaching experience, thus contrasting with the relatively inexperienced staff in School B.

This school opted for the classroom English teacher system; there were 20 classroom English teachers in Grades 3 and 4 (10 in each grade). The class size was relatively small (35 students) compared to other schools because there is a smaller population of children in the city than in the suburbs. The principal of this school was very enthusiastic about English education and had been actively involved in the Seoul Elementary English Teachers Association. The classroom teacher system was chosen by the principal, because, in contrast to the principal in School B, the principal in School C believed that through sustained opportunities for interaction, the classroom teacher could provide more language input to students in their school day. About 50% of the classroom teachers said that they were assigned to Grades 3 and 4 by the principal, rather than volunteering for this assignment. Due to the principal's enthusiasm for English education, this school also offered an English class to Grades 5 and 6 once a week, taught by an English special teacher.

In this school, Jung found that teachers expressed two contrasting views on the elementary English program. Most of the Grade 4 teachers were active and seemed very confident in English teaching, because most of them had taught Grade 3 English in 1997 with the same students. (In this school, the teachers retain their students for two years). Five of the 10 teachers in Grade 4 were involved in the district's elementary English teachers association and four teachers had been teaching English as an extracurricular subject since 1982. They also had a positive collegial relationship with other teachers. Seven out of 10 teachers said they had an active exchange of teaching ideas with other teachers, and there were regular workshops in the school for teaching methods and materials development. In Grade 4 there was a head teacher, Sun Mi, who had been teaching English for seven years in elementary schools. As an experienced senior teacher, Sun Mi generally helped other teachers by providing direction and weekly lesson plans for every class in Grade 4. She had also been working at the teacher-training center as an instructor. Due to the principal's enthusiasm for English and several other equally enthusiastic teachers, the situation for English teaching in the school was highly supportive.

In contrast to the situation in Grade 4, most of the teachers in Grade 3 were new to teaching English. They also did not have a head teacher to support their teaching and communication among teachers about English teaching was rare. Furthermore, since half of the teachers said rather than volunteering they were assigned by the principal to be classroom English teachers, many felt resistant and frustrated. As two teachers wrote in their

questionnaires:

I am not good at English at all, and I have to teach English. I really feel sorry for my students who have to learn English from me (classroom teacher, Grade 3, 1998).

People think elementary teachers can teach English because the level is very low and easy, but "being able to teach" is different from "how to teach." There must be much difference in teaching done by somebody who likes English and who wants to teach, and who is good at English, and somebody who has to teach out of obligation. There must be something wrong in the concept that all elementary teachers should be involved in English teaching (classroom teacher, Grade 3, 1998).

Some teachers felt that this school overemphasized English at the expense of other subjects and the resulting tension created more stress in their teaching. As Kyung Mi, a Grade 3 teacher, said: "Our school has a diverse age range of teachers. To some old teachers or some that are not interested in teaching English, the atmosphere of this school is quite stressful. We sometimes feel excluded" (Kyung Mi, Grade 3 teacher 1998).

This school also offered an after-school English program run by a local private company. Since the parents at this school could not afford private English education outside school, students' participation in this program was very high. About 10 students in each class in Grades 3 and 4 attended this program. These students normally acted as group leaders in the regular English class.

Unlike schools A and B, School C did not have a special English room and the multimedia system had been installed in only five classrooms in Grades 3 and 4. Accordingly, unlike school A and B, where CD-ROMs were very popular, CD-ROM activities were very rare in School C. Teachers said that the most popular activity in School C was the "game activity": "I normally started with a review using a guessing game and then introduced different kinds of games in a group activity to reinforce what students learned" (Sun Mi, 1998). There was a wide range in textbook usage among the teachers. More than half of the teachers in this school said they re-structured the textbook according to students' interests. While 72% of the teachers occasionally depended on the textbook in their class, about 20% depended totally on the textbook.

#### DISCUSSION: GOVERNMENT POLICY AND SCHOOL IMPLEMENTATION

In reflecting on government policy, on the one hand, and its implementation within schools, on the other, we have identified four issues for further



discussion. These issues address teachers' perceptions of the English program; concerns about the English teacher system and teacher training; challenges in classroom implementation; and the sociocultural impact of the program on students and teachers. We address each of these issues in turn.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of The English Program**

Drawing on the interviews, classroom observations, and the results of the second questionnaire, comprehensively completed by 29 teachers in schools A, B, and C, we found that 90% of the English teachers in the study agreed that it was necessary to teach English as a compulsory subject in elementary school. In contrast to the government's position that English should be promoted as an international language, however, about 60% of the teachers viewed English as only one of the foreign languages, rather than as a special international language. Thus they believed that English should not be unduly emphasized as a major subject in the elementary curriculum. While 9% believed that English should not be taught at elementary level at all, the remaining 31%, who did perceive English as an international language, also agreed that English should be a major subject in elementary schools. This suggests that if teachers perceive English to be an international language, they tend to promote it more vigorously in the elementary English program.

As to the timing of the program, 36% of the teachers thought that 1997 was an appropriate year for starting the elementary English program, but about 44% thought the timing premature, given the lack of preparation time for training the English teachers and developing teaching materials. As two teachers said:

It was nonsense to ask elementary teachers to teach spoken English with only 120 hours of teacher training (classroom teacher, School C).

Even with the materials, it is so hard to teach English. There are totally new methods, it is difficult to lead the class in English, it is difficult to talk to students in English, and it is difficult to prepare the materials (classroom teacher, School B).

In contrast, 20% of the teachers thought that Korea should have started elementary English education earlier. Teachers who were most enthusiastic towards English teaching frequently responded in this way.

### **The English Teacher System and Teacher Training**

Most classroom teachers in schools A and C (15 out of 22) strongly favored the English special teacher system on the grounds that classroom teachers

do not have enough time to prepare English teaching materials. As two of them said:

We have to teach 10 subjects in Grade 3. How can we spend time preparing only for English class? (classroom teacher, School C).

English class cannot be taught without materials. Most classes focus on games and plays. You can listen to the tapes and watch the videotapes. But if you don't have materials, you really cannot make the class interesting. But as a classroom teacher, we don't have that much time (classroom teacher in School B).

In addition, some teachers claimed that English teaching methods call on teachers to be outgoing and energetic, which causes discomfort among some Korean teachers. As one noted:

The current goal of English teaching as much as possible is to encourage fun when learning English. Teachers should use lots of physical activities, songs, and games. If the teacher has an outgoing and cheerful personality, she or he will be a suitable person for this kind of teaching. I am not that kind of person. English teaching always makes me feel awkward and it's not me (Jung Min, Grade 3 teacher).

Some English special teachers, however, complained about the English special teacher system because they encountered difficulties with classroom management and discipline:

It is so hard to manage 42 students as a special teacher. They don't listen to us if we are not their classroom teachers (English special teacher, School A).

The main problem of English special teachers is that we don't have much rapport with students. Sometimes it is harder to check students' individual achievement (English special teacher, School A).

Furthermore, each school seemed to have a different policy about managing the English special teacher system. For example, while School A respected the English special teachers' need for preparation time, School B added additional duties to their workload. As noted earlier, another problem with the English special teacher system concerns its incompatibility with the current administrative structure. As the principal in School A pointed out: "In elementary schools, all teachers transfer to other schools every four years. Then how we can manage the English special teacher system?"

In sum, we found that despite the problems with the English special system, the majority of the teachers (60%) preferred the English special system over the classroom teacher system. The main concern of classroom teachers was that they did not have the time to prepare for English classes, nor did they have the time to become sufficiently proficient in English. We found, however, that if the classroom teachers were enthusiastic about English and if they made strong connections with other teachers to share ideas and



resources, classroom teachers preferred the classroom teacher system. As the principal in School C believed, classroom teachers are in a position to give more language input to students throughout the day. Jung found that several classroom teachers used English during the lunch hour and at recess to remind students of what they had learned. In contrast, some English special teachers complained that students easily forgot what they had learned, because students did not receive any reinforcement during the week. In addition, the classroom teachers had a sound knowledge of individual student's achievement levels, an important factor in managing the large class size. Indeed, despite the challenges of the classroom English teacher, the head teachers in school B and C did not reject the classroom teacher system. The Grade 4 teachers in School C and the head teacher in School B led the English class successfully as classroom teachers, supported by strong connections with other teachers through the local teachers' meetings.

Notwithstanding the advantages of the classroom teacher system, when considering the day-to-day demands of the current classroom teacher situation in Korea—where teachers have to take care of over 40 students and teach 10 subjects—retaining the classroom teacher system will increase teachers' teaching load and possibly lower the quality of English teaching. An important point to note is that after the economic crisis of the late 1990s, the Korean government decided to continue the classroom teacher system rather than shift fully toward the special teacher system. Retaining the quality of the elementary English program under the classroom teacher system will likely be an ongoing challenge in the elementary English education program in Korea.

In terms of teacher training, we found that the government's extensive English teacher training program was effective in helping teachers understand clearly the purpose and direction of the program.

The English teacher training helped me understand the direction of the program. If I didn't take the training, I would start to teach the alphabet (Grade 3 teacher).

Most of the teachers stated that teacher training was helpful for their lessons. Nevertheless, most active English teachers stated that English teacher training should be given to a restricted number of teachers who are interested in English and who want to develop their careers as English special teachers.

### Issues in Classroom Implementation

Three issues emerged as the most difficult challenges facing elementary teachers in the classroom implementation of the new program: materials development, large class size, and teachers' English proficiency.

Almost 80% of the teachers pointed to materials development as the most difficult component in teaching English in the classroom. Most of the teachers said that they lacked the knowledge to develop the materials themselves: "Currently we have to make all flash cards, game boards, and picture cards. The textbook publishing company should provide the basic materials" (classroom teacher, School B).

Almost 70% of the English teachers highlighted large class size as another barrier preventing the implementation of the oral English program; this issue is directly related to the teachers' lack of time for materials development. In this regard, many teachers wanted to have workbook-style textbooks in which students can work individually. Otherwise, most teachers said it was very difficult to prepare a copy of the materials for each individual student. According to some classroom teachers, another way of overcoming problems of materials development was to make the materials with the students in the English or art class. By making the materials together, students could have a greater sense of participation and, at the same time, save time for teachers. To overcome the problem of large class size, many teachers also frequently used group activities in their classes. Jung found groupings of four to six students a common practice across the schools. In addition, the composition of groups contributed to addressing differences in English ability among the students, since most teachers usually mixed advanced students with weaker students and used the advanced students as group leaders.

Finally, about half of the teachers regarded their limited English proficiency as the most obvious challenge to successful classroom teaching, and in this regard, about 80% of the English teachers worked on developing their oral English skills. One senior teacher said he always listened to classroom English tapes during the commute to school. Several teachers said they attended a private language institute to improve their conversational English. Some teachers said they attended regular weekly English meetings with other colleagues. About 60% said they use English more than half of the time when they teach English, while 30% said they use English more than 70% of the time. In the classroom, most teachers reverted to Korean when giving instructions for games or explanations of situations. About 90% felt that it was much better for the class if teachers spoke more English, but because of their lack of proficiency, they felt disappointed with their performance in the class. To improve the elementary teachers' English ability, several teachers hoped that the government would provide a more continuous English class with English native speakers as a part of teacher training: "We need more constant support to improve our language skills through conversational classes with English native speakers" (Kyung Mi, 1998).

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## The Sociocultural Impact of The Elementary English Program

The sociocultural impact of the elementary English program can be seen as both positive and negative. From a positive point of view, the program has had an enormous impact on English education in Korea in terms of teacher education, teaching methodology, and materials development. By successfully setting up an oral English program in the elementary school, the government has sought to improve on the earlier curriculum, which focused primarily on reading and grammar. As well, through activity- and experience-based teaching, Korean teachers can modify traditional teaching methods and explore a variety of innovative teaching methods in English education. As indicated in the comments below, activity-based English teaching might also affect teaching in other subjects in a positive way.

Our students are so used to writing . . . Because of the restrictions on the written words in the English program, however, students can learn that they don't need to write and they can learn something through the activity. I think the new English program would break down the students' and parents' preconceptions about learning (Yang Kyung, School A).

I wish sometimes how nice it would be if I applied this method to teach Korean (classroom teacher, School C).

I wish that my students could derive a sense of fun from learning in other subjects (classroom teacher, School C).

On a negative note, however, some teachers expressed concern that the elementary English program accelerates the dominance of English in Korean education, resulting in the neglect of other subjects:

We had to eliminate one of our science labs to make a new English room (English special teacher, School A).

The English textbook is much better and much more interesting than the Korean (classroom teacher, School B).

Many teachers are questioning why so much money should be invested in English, while ignoring other subjects (classroom teacher, School B).

If you look at the current educational situation, it seems like computer skills and English ability are the most important factors in judging who is a competent elementary teacher. There are a lot more important qualifications than these, and senior teachers would be frustrated with this situation (classroom teacher, School C).

Furthermore many teachers have expressed concern about students' preference for English class, fearing that it undermines their commitment to the Korean language and cultural practices. Students tend to be more attracted

to English, not only because of its status as an international language, but also because of the appealing English teaching methods.

I think students really like English. Unlike other subjects, English is more fun and teachers don't require discipline. That's why they like it (classroom teacher, School C).

Students like English class much more than Korean class because of the different teaching methods. Korean class requires lots of thinking and practice, but English is a class of fun (classroom teacher, School B).

Today, more children aspire to the Western culture. I am sometimes worried if we ignore our own culture too much (classroom teacher, School B).

When we host English speech contests in our school, the parents are so excited and try to support their children as much as possible. In any Korean public speech contest, we wouldn't find such enthusiasm (classroom teacher, School B).

Nobody appreciates if students are good at Korean, but if they are good at English, everyone appreciates that (classroom teacher, School C).

### CONCLUSION

The new elementary English program has had a powerful impact on the Korean educational system in that it is bringing about revolutionary change, not only in the teaching of English, but also in terms of pedagogy and teacher training, more broadly. The implementation of the program shows the importance of support by principals and head teachers, as well as the crucial role of teacher training. In schools with adequate support, and where teachers themselves believe that English instruction is important, the conditions for effective language instruction seem to exist. For some, however, this success comes at a heavy price, if the Korean language and Korean educational practices are compromised. It remains to be seen whether the new elementary English program can indeed achieve the hope, expressed by policymakers, that "early foreign language learning [will] promote students' appreciation of Korean culture and understanding of other cultures." If this hope is not realized, policymakers may have to surrender their ideal of peaceful coexistence of the English language and educational practices alongside their Korean counterparts.

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