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A Case Study of an English Immersion Program in a South Korean Elementary School

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Abstract:

This report is the first of a series of several investigations of elementary school foreign language immersion education in Japan and Korea. The goal of the investigations is to explore the possibility of establishing effective elementary school immersion programs in two of the most monolingual and monocultural societies in world. The results of this research also have possible implications for regular, non-immersion, elementary school foreign language education. Future observations will take place in Japan at the Katoh Gakuen Elementary School and at a Korean-medium elementary school.

Data for this report were collected during a three-hour observation session at Young Hoon Elementary School in Korea on July 10, 2000. Young Hoon Elementary School is the first elementary school in Korea to implement an English immersion program. The immersion program is a partial-immersion program in which one class is divided into two sections, each taught by a Korean and a native speaker of English. The school is a private school with a student body of slightly over 1,000 students in the northern part of Seoul. Additional information was obtained from written reports about the schools and an informal interview with the coordinating teacher of the immersion program.

Results from the observation showed that native-speaker teachers taught exclusively in English and remained focused on the content of the lesson. Gestures and visual aids were used frequently to introduce new vocabulary and check comprehension. During activity periods, students spoke English with native-speaker teachers,

but Korean with their peers. All textbooks and auxiliary material were written in English. Classes conducted by Korean teachers were taught in Korean and used Korean-language materials.

Though a one-time observation is too short to allow for substantive evaluation of the program, two positive developments were noted: students “enjoyed” English and showed no signs of inhibited development of Korean language-skills. Students were attentive and interested in teaching conducted in English, and they were open and receptive to native-speaker teachers. Thus, the primary goals of the program--developing an interest in English and other cultures in an open and creative environment--were achieved. Because the program is still new, it is difficult to evaluate its effectiveness over time. Further research on the program and of similar types of partial-immersion programs offers a useful (and perhaps critical) perspective on the emerging debate about how best to integrate English education into elementary schools in Korea and Japan.

I. Background Information on Immersion Programs

- A. Goal: bilingualism (maintenance, transitional, additive)
- B. Results: bilingualism and biliteracy (minimal, partial, full)
- C. Types: full immersion, partial immersion, two-way immersion
- D. Characteristics (from Johnson and Swain 1997):
 1. The L2 is a medium of instruction
 2. The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum
 3. Overt support exists for the L1
 4. The program aims for additive bilingualism
 5. Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom
 6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency
 7. The teachers are bilingual
 8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community

Table 1. Overview of Different Types of Immersion Programs

Feature	Canada	Luxemburg	Foyer	United States (two-way)
Nature	Additive	Additive	Additive maintenance	Additive maintenance
Languages	L1 English L2 French	L1 Lux. L2 German L3 French	Heritage lang. L2 Dutch L3 French	L1 Heritage lang. L2 English/ L2 Heritage lang.
Outcome	Partial bi- lingualism/ biliteracy	Full triling. full bi- literacy	Full biling./ biliteracy partial trilingual	Partial bilingualism/ biliteracy/ transition to English
Population	Middle class	Everyone	Immigrants	Immigrants Middle class
Target lang. in environ.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Target lang. used by peers	No	Yes	Yes	Various
Target lang. as subject	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teaching in native lang.	No	No	Yes	Yes
Native-speaker teachers	Some	Yes	Yes	Various

II. Immersion Programs in Japan and South Korea

A. Japan: Katoh Gakuen Elementary School

B. Korea: Young Hoon Elementary School

C. International Schools

III. A Case Study of Young Hoon Elementary School

A. *Table 2. Overview of the Program*

Start Year:	1995
Number of Students:	396 (36.5% of total)
Number of Grades:	First through fourth
Number of classes:	11
Number of Students in a Class:	36 (limit)
Number of Foreign Teachers:	13*
Origin of Foreign Teachers:	USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand
Age Range of Foreign Teachers:	23-69
Number of Korean Teachers:	11
Organization of Classrooms:	Open—No barriers
Organization of Time:	Free—No bells
Curriculum:	Same as national curriculum
Textbooks:	English translations of officially approved Korean textbooks; American elementary school textbooks
Admission:	Consultation, boy/girl balance, lottery (only 1/3 of applicants can be accepted)
Cost:	340,000 won per month**
Intellectual Influences:	Canadian immersion programs U.S. Immersion and bilingual programs Katoh Gakuen Elementary School Krashen's "input hypothesis" Globalization

*Two teachers teach EFL in the regular curriculum.

**Regular curriculum tuition is 170,000 won per month.

B. Table 3. The Young Hoon Program Compared with Established Programs (from Baetens Beardsmore 1994)

Feature	Canada	Luxembourg	Foyer	Young Hoon
Nature	Additive	Additive	Additive Maintenance	Additive
Languages	L1 English L2 French	L1 Lux L2 German L3 French	Heritage lang L2 Dutch L3 French	L1 Korean L2 English
Outcome	Partial bi- lingualism/ biliteracy	Full triling. full bi- literacy	Full biling./ biliteracy partial trilingual	Partial bilingualism/ biliteracy
Population	Middle class	Everyone	Immigrants	Middle/Upper- Middle Class
Target lang. in environ.	No	Yes	Yes	No
Target lang. used by peers	No	Yes	Yes	No
Target lang. as subject	No	Yes	Yes	No
Teaching in native lang.	No	No	Yes	Yes
Native-speaker teachers	Some	Yes	Yes	Half

C. Table 4. Flow of a Typical Class or "Instructional Session"*

Order of Activity	Student/Teacher Relations
1. Class divides	
2. Presentation/Drill	Students gather around teacher Teacher-controlled activity
3. Practice/Creation	Students work in groups Teacher circulates, helping individuals and groups of students
4. Conclusion	Students gather around teacher again
5. Break/Play	

*Classes that continue projects from the previous day often follow the reverse order.

D. Language Issues

1. Vocabulary and listening intensive
2. Frequent comprehension checks
3. Extensive use of gestures and modeling
4. Importance of teacher-fronted activities
5. Korean used among peers mixed with English jokes
6. Active parental involvement

E. Future Directions

1. Turning the rest of the school into immersion
2. Problem of middle and high school

IV. Tentative Evaluation of Young Hoon Immersion Program

- A. Partial bilingualism achieved with Korean remaining the stronger language
- B. Comprehension skills and learning strategies outpace productive skills—fluency over accuracy
- C. Clever adaptation to government regulations
- D. Motivation for all learning greatly enhanced
- E. Openness to other cultures and school as an "open society"
- F. Useful Model for other elementary schools and middle and high school

G. Quality language education requires small classes and trained teachers (money)

H. Implications for Japan: the 3.6% issue and ALT's

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report of Young Hoon Elementary School.

Selected Websites:

Young Hoon Schools (elementary through high school):

<http://younghoon-e.ed.seoul.kr>

Katoh Gakeun Schools (elementary through high school):

<http://www.katoh-net.ac.jp>

Annotated Bibliography for Immersion Language Teaching from the University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition:

<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/immersion-abstract3.html>

(additional links available the English Education in East Asia Website)

List of Supplementary Material:

1. Sample Lesson Plans from the 1999 school year
2. Article from *Mainichi Weekly*, May 6, 2000
3. Article from *The Korea Herald*, April 6, 2000