

# Primary ELT in Korea: Start, Taxi, Take-off and Fly

*WonKey LEE, PhD*

Seoul National University of Education, KOREA

jwkl@snue.ac.kr

## Abstract

I would like to discuss the developmental stages of primary ELT in Korea, by using the analogy of an airplane's flying procedure: start, taxi, take-off and fly.

**Index Terms:** primary English Education, Korea

### 1. Start (early 1980's~1995)

Necessity is the mother of invention. There were many reasons for starting to teach English at primary schools in Korea.

#### 1.1. Changes of the society

First, English has become a global language wittingly and unwittingly. Modern science and technology have made startling progress, as have the means of land-sea-and-air transportation. Thus Korean society changed very swiftly and has become a knowledge and information-based society, thanks to the ceaseless advancement in computer science and information technology. In this process, English has become the most important means of creating, storing and disseminating knowledge and information.

In the early 1990's the Western Bloc replaced the GATT system with the WTO system. This instigated a fierce competition among countries. The Korean government at that time (Kim Young Sam 1992~1998) was shocked and started to implement a globalization policy in order to cope with the new development in the world situation.

#### 1.2. Unsatisfactory secondary ELT

On the other hand, the ELT in Korea until that time in secondary schools was generally evaluated as ineffective and inefficient. English was taught mainly by the grammar translation method for mainly exam preparation purposes. The ELT was very much written English centered, and spoken English was given minor attention by teachers and students and parents as well. So there was a great need to improve and rectify English education at secondary schools.

#### 1.3. Primary English as an extracurricular activity

In the early 1980's, the government encouraged primary schools to run a variety of extracurricular activities. It was meant to ease the inflexibility of the national curriculum and to foster the balanced development of students by allowing them

to have a variety of activities and experiences other than school subjects. At that time, some committed teachers started to teach English at primary schools as an extracurricular activity. Primary English as an extracurricular activity continued to be taught until the mid 1990's.

As the society has changed, English has become a crucial factor determining one's quality of life. In this process English was generally regarded with no big objection as the means of international communication. Considering all these points, the Kim Young Sam government decided to introduce English into the primary school curriculum.

### 2. Taxi (1995~1997)

To implement primary ELT, the first thing that had to be done was to create a national curriculum, which would specify what to teach to what extent for each grade. So the first version of the primary ELT curriculum was created and announced in 1995.

#### 2.1 Pros and cons of primary ELT

When creating the curriculum, a great number of opinions from all walks of life were gathered and discussed. There were of course pros and cons. A majority of approving opinions were:

- We can't stem the tide of globalization in which we have to use English.
- English is necessary to secure one's quality of life, and national competitiveness.
- Primary ELT can contribute to reducing the gap in levels of English achievement between individuals, regions and socioeconomic classes, by providing a national education to all students. Students from low-income families or from poor and remote regions can also get English education equally provided by the national curriculum.

A majority of opposing opinions were:

- Young students may come to overly admire Western cultures, depreciating their own. Students' sense of national identity may get damaged or hampered from growing.
- National language education may be weakened due to the inclination to English education.
- Students' and parents' excessive desire to get ahead may cause them to rely on private sector education, and incur financial burdens.

- The English divide may deepen because well-off parents will pay a lot more money for their children's English education than ordinary parents.

## 2.2 Main objective of primary ELT

The most important objective of primary ELT was and is to get students interested and familiar with English and make them feel confident in using it. To develop English communicative ability was and is a secondary objective. To lay a foundation for developing English communicative ability in the future was seen as more educational and more effective in the long run. Thus, primary ELT was conducted by teaching mainly spoken English in a small amount by activity-based methods, such as games, play, song and chant.

## 2.3 Video aids for teaching English and for teacher education

Textbooks were developed according to the national curriculum specifications between the latter half of 1995 and 1996. One guideline for the textbook development was the textbook should accompany an appropriate teacher's guidebook and a video aid. The video aid was required to include teaching methods for each unit and each learning task along with native speaker pronunciations. The use of the video aid was meant to compensate for the lack of teacher training. It aimed successfully at securing a minimum achievement level across all Korea. Here all the students were expected to get exposed to the video aids unit by unit, and learn English presented by the video aids.

## 3. Take-off (1997~2000)

In 1997, primary ELT started finally; 2 hours a week for grades 3, 4, 5 and 6. There were lots of expectations for the future prospects of primary ELT. In most schools, it started and moved on even with some difficulties. As the national curriculum was revised in 1997, primary ELT continued with new textbooks, and the video teaching aid was replaced with a CD-ROM.

### 3.1 Positive effects of primary ELT

As of now, since primary ELT started in 1997, evaluations show that;

- + People have become more open-minded and more globalized in attitudes.
- + People have become more interested in English as a global language.
- + People have come to enjoy more enhanced English language proficiency.

The biggest problem encountered was the teachers' insufficient English proficiency and professional training in primary ELT, exactly as foreseen.

## 3.2 Negative effects of primary ELT

### Insufficient teacher training

Teachers were not familiar with teaching only spoken English (listening and speaking). They themselves had mostly learned written English by the grammar-translation method. Many of the teachers had to heavily rely on the video (CD-Rom) aids, because their spoken English proficiency was not enough to teach, and their professional training in primary English teaching methods was not sufficient.

### Private sector education flourishing

Parents became uneasy and started to send their children to private institutes, whose aim was to make money, rather than to educate. They taught more difficult English that was more advanced than the school schedules, centering on written English. Private sector teachers were not familiar with spoken English, either. Consequently private institutes made students find school teaching uninteresting and trivial, and school teaching became more ineffective and inefficient.

### Gap between primary and secondary ELT

Primary ELT was heavily inclined toward the teaching of spoken English. For the 3rd years, there was no written English introduced. Written English (Reading and writing) was delayed until the 4th grade and the level and amount of written English was very basic and meager. Too great an inclination toward spoken English caused no small number of problems; it caused a big gap between primary English teaching and middle school English teaching, where reading and grammar, vocabulary are a lot more emphasized. Too much emphasis on teaching spoken English in primary ELT, at the expense of written English means that children find it difficult to study English when they go to middle school. This is regarded as a main cause for the thriving of private sector ELT.

## 4. Fly (2001~present)

Approaching the new millennium, the year 2,000, the then-president, Kim Dae Jung(1998~2003) was determined to modernize all the classrooms with high-tech equipment such as computers, very high-speed internet, monitor screens, etc. The class size was reduced to a maximum of 35 students per classroom. These policies cost a huge amount of money.

Korea's current government under President Lee Myung Bak (2008~present) has been enforcing a Public School English Education Reinforcement Policy (PSEERP). A great deal of the educational budget is spent on ELT in Korea. It is the Korean government's all-out efforts to transform ELT, which has been stigmatized as one of the most 'high-cost low-

outcome' areas. Now the central government have rolled up their sleeves up to do something about this.

Those efforts include;

- Revising the national curriculum to increase English teaching hours at primary schools (2 hours for grades 3 and 4, 3 hours for grades 5 and 6)
- Reinforcing teacher preparation and teacher development (pre-service and in-service)
- Employing instructors of English speaking (intensifying teaching of speaking)
- Reinforcing the teacher employment test (from 2 stages to 3 stages)
- Emphasizing 'Teaching English in English' (TEE accreditation system with incentive)
- Employing native-speaking English teachers (EPIK program)
- Developing a national test of English (Internet-based four skill test) (\*not primary ELT)
- Operating the Teach and Learn in Korea (TaLK) program
- Utilizing IPTV for ELT, etc.

The basic assumption underlying all these ELT policies is that ELT policy efforts should be made to meet the two necessary conditions for learning English in Korea: exposure to English and use of English.

## 5. Status quo and future direction

Thanks to the former government's efforts, Korea has been enjoying many IT-based technologies in schools. Most classrooms across the country are equipped with a computer, a big television set connected to the computer, and high speed internet, and most schools have at least one electronic whiteboard which is used connected to a computer and the Internet.

IT-based teaching in schools is now an everyday experience. Some textbooks are accompanied with relevant CD-ROMs. Basically, teachers are expected to play the CD, and get students exposed to native speakers' speaking of English, and to the way the learning tasks in the textbooks are performed, and then to have students perform the learning tasks in the same way as seen in the CD-ROM. This is to demonstrate to students how to perform the tasks, but it also has another important purpose; to train teachers who have insufficient professional training in teaching methods. The CD-ROM is meant for primary English teachers in general across Korea.

For some more competent teachers, there are a variety of IT-based methods and materials provided through several national educational research and developmental institutes, such as KERIS(Korea Educational Resource and Information Service), KICE(Korea Institute for Curriculum and Development), EBS

(Educational Broadcasting System), and SMOE (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education).

Primary ELT is basically spoken English-centered, so tasks and activities presented in the text books are mainly listening and speaking-oriented. For 3rd and 4th year students, about 90~100% of the total class hours are devoted to listening and speaking, and for 5th and 6th years, over 70% of the total class hours to teaching spoken English. This means that students are given opportunities to listen and speak English during the class hours.

The main objective of primary ELT is to reduce students' anxiety about English, and to increase their confidence in English. Therefore, listening and speaking are a lot more emphasized than reading and writing in such learning tasks as; • Listen and Repeat/ • Look and Speak/ • Role play/ • Game/ • Task/ • Sing/ • Chant/ • Review/. (See a CD-ROM title)

A variety of experiments are being carried out now, such as teaching English using IPTV. The IPTV is an Internet protocol television, through which the Internet can be surfed and a variety of learning materials can be stored and retrieved as appropriate.

In addition, a digital English textbook has been developed and is now being applied to more than 100 experimental schools which are mostly located in less privileged regions. For the students living in remote areas without modcons where native speakers of English are not available, video conferencing type teaching of English is conducted.

In this presentation, the developmental stages of primary ELT will be presented and discussed, along with some of the governmental efforts to bring about changes in the Korean ELT. We will also discuss how to bring about changes bearing in mind that we teach and learn English not because of its innate value or beauty, but because of our need for i