
Teaching English as a foreign language to primary school students in East Asia

ZHENHUI RAO AND PING YU

Challenges and future prospects

Introduction

With the spread of economic globalization and the accelerating demand for English, governments in East Asian countries have been updating their English-in-education policies so as to enhance the quality of English education in the region (Hu & McKay, 2012). Of all these policies, the introduction of English as a compulsory subject at younger and younger ages is ‘possibly the world’s biggest policy development in education’ (Johnstone, 2009: 33). It is widely believed that those who start learning English at an earlier age can utilize their ‘critical period’ to learn English more efficiently (Nunan, 2003; Y. Hu, 2007). However, the expansion of teaching English to young learners has not been unanimously supported and there is no conclusive evidence for the benefits of early exposure to a new language (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014). Some researchers point out ‘the advantages of postponing formal teaching in specific contexts’ (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2001: 163).

Despite the ongoing debate on ‘the earlier the better’ policy, teaching English in primary schools is now a reality in East Asian countries (Hu & McKay, 2012). Instead of focusing discussion on whether it is beneficial to teach English in primary schools or not, recent research has turned to examine the effects of contextual and socioeconomic factors on English as foreign language (hereafter EFL) teaching and started exploring how to improve the quality of teaching English to young learners (Copland & Garton, 2014). It is realized that early instruction itself is not sufficient for efficient English learning, and that EFL teaching in primary schools is affected by a variety of other factors, such as the number of qualified teachers,

teaching methods, teaching facilities and materials, and the amount of instruction time (G. Hu, 2005).

With all these factors in mind, we intend to offer some proposals for improving the efficiency of English teaching in the primary schools of East Asian countries. First, we examine the challenges associated with teaching English to young learners



Zhenhui Rao is a professor in Jiangxi Normal University, China. He has a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of South Australia. His recent publications have appeared in journals such as ELT Journal (2007), Language Learning Journal (2016), Language Awareness (2007), and Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development (2010). His main research interests are in English teaching methodology and language learning strategies. Email: rao5510@jxnu.edu.cn.



Ping Yu is an associate professor at Jiangxi Normal University, China. She is currently a PhD student in applied linguistics at Jiangxi Normal University. She has been teaching English for 15 years, and has published ten articles in academic journals. Her main research interests are in English teaching methodology and second language acquisition. Email: yu0798@163.com.

in these countries, particularly China, South Korea and Japan, and then analyze the factors that lead to the challenges. Finally, we make recommendations for governments and primary school teachers in East Asian countries to improve EFL teaching in the future. These recommendations are based on the findings in the previous studies and our own research experience in this area. For the past ten years, we have been engaged in the research on teaching English in Chinese primary schools. We hope that these suggestions contribute to the development of English teaching in East Asian primary schools.

Challenges associated with teaching English to young learners

Various challenges associated with teaching English to young learners have been reported in the literature, but the major challenges English teachers in East Asia encounter can be classified into four categories: unequal access to English, shortage of qualified English teachers, ineffective pedagogy policy and large classes.

Unequal access to English

Butler (2015) states that one of the major challenges in teaching English to young learners in East Asia is students' inequality of access to English among cities and between urban and rural areas. For a long time, governments in this region have been lowering the official starting age in English-in-education policies so as to minimize regional gaps in access to English education among children. However, the disparity in policy implementation has resulted in unequal access to primary English education (G. Hu, 2005). Take English language education in Chinese primary schools as an example: although it was not until 2001 that English was made a compulsory subject in the Chinese national primary curriculum, primary schools in large cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, began to offer English as a core subject as early as the beginning of the 1990s (Y. Hu, 2007). A study by Y. Hu (2008) also discovered that the top primary schools in the urban areas started to teach English long before 2001, and that the primary schools in the rural areas could not incorporate English into their curriculum even in the 2004–5 school year.

Not only do the regional differences in implementing government policies bring about inequality in English language education in primary schools, but parents' socioeconomic status also

contributes to unequal access to English among primary school students. Lee's (2009) study showed that there has been a huge increase in English education in the private sector in many East Asian countries. Such an expanding private English education sector enables wealthy parents to send their children to private schools or for private English lessons. In South Korea, for example, 70% of families in Seoul were found to send their children to private language schools and 40% of families in the rest of the country make use of private English education as well (Butler, 2015). Similarly, Japanese parents also spend a large sum of money to send their children to private schools for English education. Koike and Tanaka (1995) reported that Japan was one of the biggest markets of English teaching in the world, with an approximate 30 billion US dollars spent on the teaching of English every year. The same is true with Chinese parents. In order to give their children a head start in English learning, numerous Chinese parents enroll their children in after-school English training centers where various child English courses are offered (Y. Hu, 2007). Y. Hu (2008) found that some wealthy parents even hired tutors for their children.

Shortage of qualified English teachers

Another major challenge that emerges from the rapid expansion of English language education into the primary curriculum is the severe lack of qualified teachers in East Asian countries. In an investigation of four primary schools in China, Y. Hu (2008) found that the teacher shortage problem not only hampered students' progress in English learning, but also prevented some schools from offering English courses. Although the Chinese government attempts to solve this problem by asking teachers majoring in Chinese and History to teach English, none of this group of teachers is appropriately trained to teach English at the primary level (Y. Hu, 2007). In South Korea, the government invests a large amount of money and time in training primary school teachers, but many of these teachers feel rather unsatisfied with this training program (Lee, 2009). They complain that the training project consists of theory-based teacher education courses, in which they can hardly develop practical competence to implement EFL teaching in the classroom (Lee, 2009).

In addition, teachers' low proficiency level in English and their lack of confidence in using English for communication are also identified as

challenges in EFL teaching at the primary level. In a study conducted by Butler (2004) in South Korea and Japan, 91.1% of Korean primary school teachers and 85.3% of Japanese primary school teachers perceived their current English proficiency levels to be lower than the minimum levels required for teaching English under the current policies. The situation is even worse in Chinese primary schools in rural areas. According to G. Hu (2005), a large number of English teachers working in rural primary schools did not receive any postsecondary education and most of them lacked professional preparation and language competence.

To compensate for the shortage of English teachers in primary schools, some East Asian countries have employed native-English-speaking (NES) teachers in recent decades (Jeon & Lee, 2006). However, employing NES teachers also gives rise to a series of challenges for EFL teaching. Jeon and Lee (2006) found that most NES teachers involved in the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) did not have any teaching certificate and were almost untrained. Copland et al.'s (2014) study found that, though NES teachers involved in English Program in Korea (EPIK) spoke perfect English, they did not know how to manage the children. In China, NES teachers were found to be insensitive to students' linguistic problems and unfamiliar with the Chinese cultural and educational system (Rao & Yuan, 2016).

Ineffective pedagogy policy

Perhaps the most complex of the policy decisions influencing the EFL classroom in primary schools concerns the pedagogic approach recommended by governments. Given the global demand for communicative competence in English, most East Asian countries have introduced communicative language teaching (hereafter CLT) into young learner curricula (Hu & McKay, 2012). However, CLT was originally developed for teaching English as a second language in Western countries and is generally considered effective only when classes are small and classrooms are well equipped (Rao, 1996). Therefore, it might be inappropriate for teaching children in East Asian countries where classes are overcrowded and teaching equipment is scarce (G. Hu, 2005). For example, the Korean and Japanese teachers in Butler's (2005) study found it hard to implement CLT, because they lacked understanding of what CLT was. In China, the implementation of CLT was impeded by such factors as large class sizes, overloaded teachers, teachers' lack of English language

proficiency, and the local education system (Rao, 1996). Moreover, evaluation policies adopted in these countries have inhibited teachers from using CLT in the classroom (Hu & McKay, 2012). Although all three of these East Asian countries have emphasized the importance of developing students' oral communicative competence in curriculum policy, evaluation of students' achievements is often conducted using traditional paper-and-pencil tests (Butler, 2015).

Another common approach to enhance students' communicative ability in English is the immersion programs created by the governments of East Asian countries. While such immersion programs are offered in a limited number of schools in Japan (Butler, 2005), they are provided by Teaching English through English (TETE), English villages, and English camps in South Korea (Butler, 2015). However, in China teachers in some primary schools in urban areas endeavor to immerse their students in an English environment by means of English-medium instruction (G. Hu, 2009). All these programs have provided students with more opportunities to use English, but researchers have been debating the effectiveness of such immersion. G. Hu (2009) argues that there is a lack of research evidence concerning the pedagogical effectiveness of the immersion programs, and that students' immersion in an English atmosphere may exert negative effects on other curriculum subjects. Hu and McKay (2012) assert that there are not adequate financial, material and human resources for immersion programs.

Large classes

In many parts of the world, especially in East Asian countries, large classes are a common phenomenon in educational settings (Hu & McKay, 2012). In a study by Garton (2014) in South Korea, 40% of the English classes were found to contain 31–40 students and 47% of the classes contain 21–30 students. Y. Hu's study (2008) found that, even in top primary schools in Chinese urban areas, the average number of students in each class ranged from 40–50. With so many students crowded in one class, many teachers find it difficult to carry out effective classroom teaching. For example, the Korean teachers in Garton's (2014) study regarded large classes as a potential obstacle to implementing communicative teaching in EFL classes, and ranked smaller class sizes as the most important factor in improving their teaching.

The next problem arising from teaching English in large classes is related to control of and

indiscipline in the classroom. Carless's (2004) study in Hong Kong showed that teachers in primary schools were often confronted with an awkward situation when they were engaged in teaching English in large classes. On the one hand, they attempted to organize various classroom activities for students to practice their oral English. On the other hand, they were annoyed by the noise and indiscipline, and were eager to keep their classrooms as quiet and orderly as in the normal ethos of schooling. The same situation also occurs in South Korea. Li's (1998) study revealed that the larger a class was, the louder the noise would be.

The final problem in teaching English to young learners in large classes is the mixed levels of English proficiency. In a case study conducted in South Korea, Copland et al. (2014: 753) found, 'There is too big gap between fast learners and slow learners caused by private education'. They reported that it was extremely difficult for the South Korean teachers to satisfy the needs of students with various English proficiency levels in a large class. Y. Hu (2007) found that the diverse levels of English proficiency in one class placed a heavy burden on primary school teachers and prevented students from learning English effectively.

Recommendations for improving the teaching of English in primary schools in East Asian countries

Facing the challenges in teaching English to young learners, researchers and teachers have been seeking strategies to handle these problems (e.g., Butler, 2015; Hu & McKay, 2012; Y. Hu, 2007; Nunan, 2003). In this section, we make four inter-related recommendations for teaching English in primary schools in East Asian countries: (1) creating equal access to English education by increasing investment in rural schools; (2) providing teachers with local in-service training programs; (3) reconciling the communicative approach with traditional teaching methods; (4) coping with large classes with a group-centered approach.

Creating equal access to English education by increasing investments in rural schools

As shown in our review of the previous research, the unequal access to English education in the three East Asian countries is mainly brought about by the uneven distribution of English teachers in different schools. On the whole, the primary schools in urban areas can employ as many qualified teachers as necessary, but there is a severe

shortage of teachers in primary schools in rural areas (Y. Hu, 2007). To solve this problem, governments should increase investments in rural primary schools. Two measures currently adopted by the Chinese government have proved effective in this aspect. Firstly, as a way to attract qualified teachers and new graduates to work in rural areas, the Chinese government has increased salaries for the teachers in the underdeveloped areas. Secondly, some well-known teacher education colleges and universities in China are required by the government to enroll tuition-free students from the less developed areas by contract. Those enrolled under this contract are obliged to work in their original places upon graduation.

Another way to provide students with more exposure to English is through the use of modern teaching equipment and multimedia packages (Y. Hu, 2007). Since the low economic development and poor financial situation in the less developed areas do not allow rural primary schools to purchase these expensive facilities, governments need to shoulder more responsibility for providing rural primary schools with adequate teaching resources. This is exactly what the Chinese government has been attempting to do in recent years. Given that most Chinese urban schools are already well equipped, the central government is shifting its investments from urban schools to rural schools. The data in our recent research show that most Chinese rural primary schools are allocated more and more economic and material resources, making it possible to provide all rural children with equal access to English education.

Providing teachers with local in-service training programs

In addition to the availability of sufficient teachers for English teaching in primary schools, enhancing teachers' professional knowledge and skills through in-service training programs is also crucial for effective classroom teaching. Such training is especially important for those who did not start their careers as English teachers or as English teachers of young learners. As reviewed above, most primary school teachers in the three East Asian countries have received certain forms of teacher training programs, but these programs are designed at the national level and fail to take into consideration teachers' actual professional needs. Our investigation into English teaching in Chinese rural primary schools indicates that in-service training programs for teachers should be locally situated and cater for the special needs of individual English teachers.

One such teacher training program initiated in 2010 by the Ministry of Education in China has turned out to be successful to date. Though the program is nationally sponsored, it is run by local educational administrations to meet local teachers' demands. For example, if teachers find the rationales of using CLT perplexing and cannot appropriately implement it in classroom teaching, the in-service training program focuses on the elaboration of the principles for using CLT and then demonstrates how to put it into teaching practice. On the other hand, if teachers feel unsatisfied with their own English pronunciation, the training course focuses on correcting teachers' pronunciation first and then guiding them to teach students how to pronounce sounds and words accurately.

Reconciling communicative approach with traditional teaching methods

Our review of the previous studies reveals that, although the governments in these three East Asian countries have introduced CLT into young learner curricula, attempts to apply Western teaching methodologies regardless of local educational backgrounds have resulted in some unexpected challenges for all teachers (G. Hu, 2005; Hu & McKay, 2012; Li, 1998; Rao, 1996). One of the practical and efficient ways to teach English in primary schools is, according to our research experience, to reconcile CLT with traditional teaching methods. Numerous studies (e.g., G. Hu, 2005; Nunan, 2003; Rao, 1996) have showed that EFL teaching is deeply rooted in a certain context, and that it is doomed to failure if the contextual factors in English teaching are ignored. In fact, each teaching method is created to cater for a certain set of requirements for language learning, and there is no method that can satisfy the needs of all students (Nunan, 2003). By reconciling CLT with traditional teaching methods, teachers can adopt 'an informed eclecticism' (G. Hu, 2005: 655), in which they can employ teaching methods that suit 'a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular socio-cultural milieu' (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 538). In actual classroom teaching, we should not care about whether a teaching method is a traditional one or a modern one. What we do need to be particular about is whether a method or a combination of methods suits a special group of students in a special context (G. Hu, 2005).

Coping with large classes through group-centered learning

The final big challenge in teaching English to young learners, as indicated in the aforementioned literature review, is large classes with diverse levels of English proficiency. Given the fact that it is impossible for governments in these countries to reduce class sizes in the near future (Butler, 2015), teachers should find ways and develop skills for more effective classroom teaching. One possible measure they could take, as exhibited by the evidence in our research, is to cope with English teaching in large classes with group-centered learning. By working in small groups, average students have more interaction opportunities for meaningful and active use of the English language. In general, one group should consist of five to eight students and there should not be more than five to six groups in a class. Groups should be structured by including students with the same ability or mixed abilities, depending on the requirements of the classroom activities. A leader should be selected from each group, whose function is to coordinate the group activities and serve as a link with the teacher. While group work is going on, teachers should neither control and correct their students nor interrupt their students' classroom activities. Instead, they should visit the groups, observe what their students are doing and give some advice when necessary (Naughton, 2006). Of course, noise occurs in this group work, but teachers do not necessarily worry about it. If the group activities are well organized and students are actively engaged in them, teachers should allow their students to make noise, because it is productive noise.

Conclusion

Rapid expansion of English language education into the primary curriculum in East Asia has provided primary school students with opportunities to learn English and has greatly enhanced the English proficiency level in this region. However, extensive research shows that some regional and socioeconomic factors have hampered teachers in less developed areas from teaching English to young learners effectively. We have examined, in this article, the challenges teachers face, and then illustrated why these challenges might exert negative influences on their classroom teaching. On the basis of the findings in the previous studies and our own research experience, we have offered some suggestions for governments in East Asian countries to provide all primary students with

equal access to English education delivered by qualified teachers and promote teacher professional development. We believe that reconciling CLT with traditional teaching methods could enable English teachers to employ the teaching methods that best suit their local teaching contexts. Finally, we argue that group-centered learning might be a feasible approach to cope with English teaching in large classes.

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