

Preliminary Study on the Curriculum and Methodology for Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Primary Schools in Japan: Implications from Finnish Experience

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Abstract

English will be taught as a compulsory subject at primary schools in Japan from 2020. It is crucial for Japan to build knowledge on teaching English as a foreign language to primary school students. This paper explores Finnish experience in the field and try to find some implications for Japanese practice. The study identifies the early start and various options in foreign language instruction, as well as teachers' motivation as notable characteristics in Finnish practice.

Key words: EFL (English as a foreign language), basic education, national curriculum reform, teaching methodology, Finland

Introduction

From 2020, English will be taught as a compulsory subject from the 5th grade at primary schools in Japan. While the implementation contains some concerns, such as an insufficiency of readiness of Japanese teachers for teaching English to primary school students, English education as part of basic education is not a rare practice any more in other parts of the world. In Asia, for instance, students start learning English from the 3rd grade in China, Korea, and Taiwan. In Thailand, it starts from the 1st grade. In Europe, English education starts from the 2nd grade in France, and from the 1st grade in Germany (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology 2005). As teaching English as part of basic education is the irreversible global trend, it is imperative for Japan to accumulate their own experience and build knowledge on English education for primary school students. Researching good educational practices in other non-Anglophone countries is also an effective way to find the key to success in teaching English as a foreign language.

1. The purpose of this paper

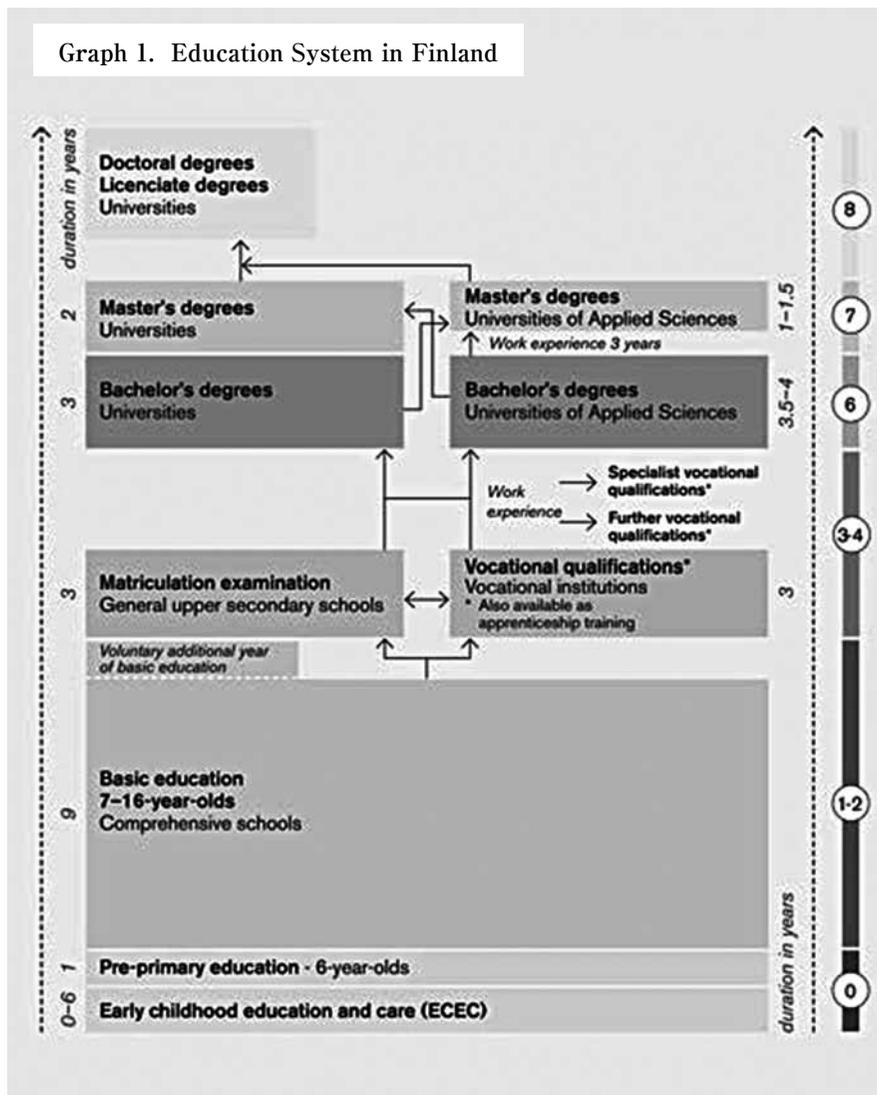
The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of foreign language education at the basic education level in Finland. This paper focuses on two aspects; firstly, the latest Finnish curriculum reform, and secondly, the development of teaching methodology in foreign language education. While Finland is famous for the successful achievements in the PISA (Program for International Students Assessment), the country also proves English proficiency in the TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language). According to the score data summary of the TOEFL iBT test in 2015, Finland obtains 23 in reading, 25 in listening, 24 in speaking, 23 in writing, and 94 in total, while Japan scores 18, 17, 17, 18, and 71 respectively (ETS 2015).

The result of the test may not be attributed only to language education at school since it is also affected by other factors, such as socio-cultural differences between the two countries. However, the languages of Finnish and Japanese share common challenges regarding learning English. Finnish belongs to the Uralic language family, which is linguistically very different from English which belongs to the Indo-European family. It is true that Japanese, as Japonic language, is far more different from English, compared with Finnish, in all linguistic aspects, such as grammar and pronunciation. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to study how Finnish teachers help students overcome the difficulty of learning English, and make them skilled English users eventually, that has been proved by the international test results.

2. The education system in Finland

The graph 1 below describes the education system from the early childhood education and care to higher education in Finland. English has started to be taught at Comprehensive Schools, which is the basic education for 7 to 16 year-old students. Finnish students have the opportunity to choose English as either the A-language or B-language out of various language options that schools offer them in the foreign language instruction. The A-language is a core subject (A1). Because of the status as the international language, English is chosen as A-language by most of the Finnish students. The A-language instruction starts normally from the 3rd grade through 9th grade, while it may sometimes commence from the 1st grade. The B-language commences from the 7th grade through 9th grade.

The national minimum time allocation is 9 weekly lessons during the 3rd -6th grade, and 7 weekly lessons during the 7th-9th for the A language according to the foreign language instruction in the basic education. As for the B language, it is 2 weekly lessons during the 3rd-6th, and 4 during 7th-9th grade. In addition, the optional



Source: Finnish National Agency for Education http://www.oph.fi/english/education_system

A2 language may commence from the 3rd grade, thus English may commence as A2 language from the 3rd grade. Besides, the optional B2 language may commence from the 7th grade (Finnish National Agency of Education 2017). In short, Finnish students start learning English earlier than Japanese students, moreover, they have opportunity to acquire multiple foreign languages other than English.

3. National curriculum reform

In Finland, Almost every 10 years, the national curriculum is reformed. Anu Halvari, the counsellor of Education at the Finnish National Board of Education, addressed on the latest national curriculum reform last year in Japan. In the symposium on January 19 in 2016 in Japan, which was held by Japanese National Institute for Educational Policy Research, she reported that Finnish national curriculum reform was a work-in progress, involving various stakeholders. After the EU council introduced CEFR (Common European Framework of the reference for languages) in 2000, Finland started their ten-year-cycled national curriculum reform in 2014. The new national core curricula for basic education was enforced in August 2016.

As the Finnish reform of the national curriculum has always engaged various stakeholders in the process, the latest reform also involved researchers, teachers, interest groups (e.g. local authorities, parents, and student unions), etc. They worked together to revise the documents and shared the understanding on the new core curricula. As for the previous curriculum, the new guidelines left room for local implementation, therefore, schools and communities can organize their own programs with discretion.

Halvari emphasized in the symposium, “learning language is a life-long process, and in Finland, every teacher is a language teacher.” English is the first foreign language for more than 90% of Finnish students. The objective of teaching English is not only to instruct global English, but also help students open their eyes to cultural diversity and develop language awareness. Thus, teachers lead students to understand the society with multi-layered linguistic and cultural identities, and linguistic thinking. Teachers need to set students’ personal goals, reflect on learning, and develop language learning strategies for them in order to promote students’ language-learning skills.

Moreover, the new national curriculum aims at evolving language proficiency in interaction skills, text comprehension and text production. The interaction skills need constructive use of language, taking initiatives, cultural appropriateness of communication, negotiation and mediation. Text (spoken and written) comprehension necessitates versatile and meaningful texts. Text (spoken and written) production requires vocabulary, structures, pronunciation, and accuracy in different purposes and genres.

4. Development of teaching methodology for language learning

The advance of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) can be said to be one of the Finnish characteristics in foreign language instruction. CLIL is the

integration of target language study with a study of a subject domain in that language. It is provided in Finland as the form of instruction to implement a plurilingual approach in language learning. In the CLIL approach, language teachers become more involved with content and content teachers become more involved with language. CLIL is expected as the method which leads plurilingualism to the mainstream in Finnish education (Marsh et al, 1998).

Before the provision of CLIL-type instructions, the teaching methods have been evolved constantly in Finland. Up to 1970s, the Grammar Translation method was generally used in the foreign language teaching at schools. In 1970, the Audio-lingual Method became popular, however, the teacher was still the authority in the class. In the new method, teachers encouraged students to participate in class activities through speaking and listening with each other. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Communicative Approach gained more popularity than the previous one. In the Communicative Approach, students were not merely required to do the oral practice with the patterned form, but they were required to create their own phrases. Therefore, students had to activate their pre-communicative knowledge and skills to produce their own spoken phrases (Jaatinen and Saarivirta, 2014).

In the 1990s, there was a paradigm shift in the Finnish language education. Until then, the main goal of foreign language learning was to obtain linguistic communicative competence. However, the new idea proposed that language and discourse cannot be isolated from cultural and social contexts, and the goal of foreign language learning is to grow out of the shell of mother tongue and their own culture (Kaikkonen 2001). Learning foreign language came to be seen as the opportunity to re-recognize their own language and culture, and the chance to understand other languages and culture. Learning a foreign language was recognized as holistic human growth toward expanding learners' view in social and cultural contexts. It helps people to improve their cultural competences. Thus, the teacher's role is to facilitate students' growth through foreign language education.

While the immersion and CLIL-type instructions gained popularity, the phenomenon brought the public concerns around 2000 in Finnish society. Opponents claimed that English instruction took valuable time away from the mother tongue. They were afraid it could lead students to impaired learning. However, a recent survey in 2011 (Leppane et al, 2011) showed that the majority of Finnish people have a positive attitude toward English-speaking classes/school. As a country with a small population and scarce resources, people share the understanding that English is important for the globalized period, therefore, it is better for all children to be well-prepared to become

skillful English users.

5. Suggestions for the implementation of the EFL in primary education

As noteworthy features in Finnish EFL education, I would like to highlight the following three points. Firstly, the early start and plurilingual approach are assumingly related to the smooth entry and students' motivation in EFL learning. Most students select English themselves in the 3rd grade (sometime 1st grade) as the core foreign language (A1) out of various foreign language options at schools. Secondly, teachers' awareness and motivation toward learning English seems to be higher than Japan. Regarding EFL, Finnish teachers share the idea of "every teacher is English teacher." Lastly, teaching methodology is advanced in Finland. In Japan, the immersion and CLIL-type instructions are still rarely practiced in the formal education system, though they are desired as the ultimate approach in EFL education. There are therefore numerous tasks Japan has to tackle within the field of EFL for primary education.

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