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program for teaching English to children :
curriculum design and evaluation

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Kanda University Pre-service Teacher Training Program for Teaching English to Children: Curriculum Design and Evaluation

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Abstract

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) developed its own pre-service teacher-training program and implemented it in the year 2005. Some 70 students have completed the 9 subject, 32 credit courses since the 2007 academic year, and an increasing number of students is pursuing the program as more attention is being paid to elementary school English education as ever before. In March 2008, an official announcement was made by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to introduce English language into the elementary school curriculum in the year 2011 from the 5th grade. With the social needs and movement toward officially incorporating English into the elementary school curriculum, the attempts were made to improve the overall program since it was first developed and implemented in the KUIS English department curriculum. This paper first briefly introduces the program content and requirements, which then is followed by the evaluation by the students.

1. Introduction

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) has designed and developed the pre-service teacher-training program for teaching English to children in 2003 and 2004, which was then implemented in 2005 into the English department curriculum. KUIS acknowledges and has long been in support of early childhood and elementary school English education, and so developing the program was an important contribution KUIS made to promote and enhance English education in

elementary schools.

In 2007, three years after the program was implemented, 26 students graduated completing all the courses offered in the program, and the present researcher set forth with the help of the teaching practicum teachers to investigate if the program was successfully carried out in terms of both the needs of the students who completed the courses and objectives of the program.

Just as the present research started in March 2008, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) made an official announcement that it is going to introduce English language into the public elementary school curriculum in the 2011 academic year starting from the 5th grade. The elementary school teachers now have to teach English once a week for 45 minutes throughout the year (35 class hours in total). The reason for officially implementing English is that more than 97% of elementary schools in Japan as of 2007 are engaging in some kind of English activities since the MEXT first enabled elementary schools to engage in English language teaching in 2002 (MEXT), and there are wide gaps in both quality and quantity of English language teaching between those schools that are actively involved in teaching and those that are incorporating it because many other schools are doing it. In terms of quantity, some schools are more eager than others about English education and spend more than a class hour (45 minutes) a week in English language teaching, while others may offer it just once a month. In terms of quality, elementary school teachers' ability to teach English varies because they are not qualified English teachers. Besides that, the number of available ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers, proficient non-Japanese English language teachers), who are employed to support homeroom teachers to teach English, also depends on the municipal and prefectural subsidies. The 2008 official

announcement by the MEXT was to address these imbalances, and in its transitional period between 2009 and 2011, the elementary schools are required to prepare and adjust their school curriculum, although the MEXT has not been extending much support for both the teachers and the elementary schools in terms of pedagogical issues and hiring policy.

Considering the perspective of the MEXT on official introduction of English into elementary school curriculum, the current pre-service teacher-training program was reviewed so as to reflect the society's needs and the language policy of the MEXT and produce the kinds of English language teachers required in elementary schools. The current research is ongoing, and the changes made by the program organizer may soon be re-revised, but in the current ambivalent situation about elementary school English education, the university's mission is to do what it can do for the best of the students and society.

In the following sections, the background of the pre-service teacher-training program is first described. Then the program overview is introduced, which then is followed by the purposes, methods, and results of the research.

2. Background

In 2003, when the investigation was conducted to determine how many universities throughout Japan were offering courses or programs to train students to be English language teachers for young children, there were virtually very few universities that offered programs for elementary school teacher education. This is no surprise because there is no "English education" in public elementary schools, and there was (still is) controversy as to whether there are any benefits of starting English education in elementary schools. Some people show strong

opposition against teaching foreign languages at such an early stage as elementary schools. Others are concerned about the busy elementary school curriculum and overworked elementary school teachers, in addition to the lack of English teacher training for elementary school teachers. Still others are worried about the mixture of all of these. Because there is no position for graduating students to work as an English teacher in elementary schools, a program such as the pre-service teacher-training program was of little value in the society. Elementary school teachers do not need to teach English at school, and the university program does not offer courses for students to be elementary school English teachers. When the program organizer first attempted to design and develop a pre-service teacher-training program at KUIS for teaching English to children, she could not find any program to model it after.

Although the society's demand for English teachers for elementary school children was not yet widely discussed as is now, KUIS had positive perspectives about teaching English to children and had always foreseen the need to train students to be qualified English teachers when the time comes in elementary schools to start English education. Just as the investigation of courses and programs started, the MEXT announced in 2003 "an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities.'" The Action Plan states that the MEXT "has formulated various measures such as the revision of the Ministry's Courses of Study with a further focus on cultivating students' basic and practical communication abilities" (March, 2003, MEXT). The Action Plan aimed to establish a system for cultivating "Japanese with English abilities" in 5 years, and to clarify "the goals and directions for the improvement of English education to be achieved by 2008 and the measures that should be taken by the government to realize these goals." (The announce-

ment made in March 2008 by the MEXT to introduce elementary school English education starting in the year 2011 was thus a conclusion they drew after 5 years of the government efforts to improve English education in Japan.)

In section 5 of the Action Plan, “Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools,” the MEXT states that it will support elementary schools by locating “personnel such as foreign teachers, those who are proficient in English and junior high school English teachers” to help elementary schools to successfully engage in “English conversation activities.” The MEXT enabled elementary schools to introduce English as “English conversation activities” when the new Course of Study was implemented in 2002. “English conversation activities” take place in the Period for Integrated Study, which was established in the official curriculum as “part of education for international understanding” (March 2003, MEXT). The MEXT at this time must have had in mind to officially introduce English into the elementary school curriculum. It would not, otherwise, have publicized its intention to support elementary schools in the Action Plan. The attitude of the MEXT toward English language education confirmed for the present researcher that creating a pre-service teacher-training program for teaching children will become of great value in the near future.

3. Theoretical perspective

Perspectives may influence and be influenced by the program developer’s views of reality. What approach to choose in developing a curriculum depends in part on how the developers formulate problems. If we formulate problems as building skills, then the curriculum will emphasize aspects that need to build skills. The program developer has adopted behavioral perspectives in designing the

teacher-training program. “Behavioral perspectives conceive of curricula as the specific destinations or targets toward which education is aimed” (Posner, 2004, p.64). The central question is what the learners should be able to do at the completion of the curriculum. The behavioral perspective encourages curriculum developers to decide what the successful graduates should be able to do. The program developer’s job then is to identify their prerequisite skills, provide opportunities for students to practice each skill, and evaluate the students’ performance. This theoretical perspective was chosen in the current program development to ensure that students graduate with the skills they need to have when start working as English teachers for children.

4. Program overview and descriptions about the required courses

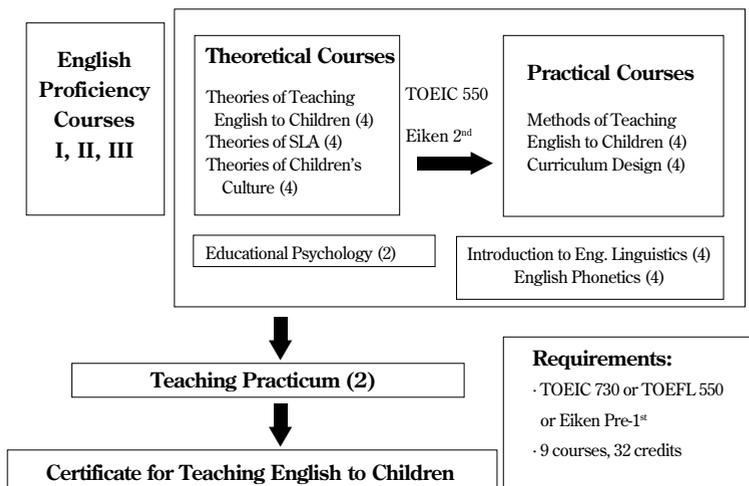
Table 1 shows the overview of the program. Kanda University Pre-Service Teacher Training Program for Teaching English to Children is composed of three theoretical and two practical courses. Theories of Teaching English to Children is an introductory course that covers basic concepts of language teaching for children. Theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) deals with issues in second language acquisition. Theories of Children’s Culture explores children’s world from various perspectives. Two practical courses are Methods of Teaching English to Children and Curriculum Design for Teaching English to Children. Students who are pursuing the program must first fulfill the requirement for the theoretical courses before registering for the practical courses. Students also have to take Educational Psychology, which is a required course for students who wish to be junior or senior high school teachers, Introduction to English Linguistics, and English Phonetics. These last two courses are introductory courses for

students at KUIS who are pursuing English language studies.

Students are also required to have an official score of TOEIC 550 or above, or Eiken 2nd grade in order to advance to the practical courses. The practical courses are intended for those who are willing to complete the program and not just take courses on how to teach games and activities to children. Students also need to have theoretical knowledge or know the rationale behind activities before they actually engage in games and activities. When all the required subjects are completed, the students go to elementary schools to do a teaching practicum. Both theoretical and practical courses are offered twice a week for a whole semester. The program, therefore, requires attendance of about 220 hours for each course. As for the teaching practicum, students are required to be present at their designated elementary schools for a full day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. once a week for a whole semester. The students, therefore, spend about 117 hours in total at an elementary school. Students also have to come to the three classes for a pre-conference before they actually start the teaching practicum.

Nine courses, 32 credits, are required for students to complete the course work, but the program also requires that the students successfully score certain levels of English proficiency to get a certificate: TOEFL 550, TOEIC 730, or Eiken Pre-1st grade. These levels were set in accordance with the requirement that the MEXT postulated in the Action Plan for junior and senior high school English teachers to aim at. The program developer accepted these scores as a reasonable standard for the future teachers to aim at to teach English to children as well.

TABLE 1 Overview of KUIS Pre-Service Teacher Training Program for Teaching English to Children



Teaching practicum

The teaching practicum is the last course where students actually experience teaching English to elementary school children. This is where students are expected to exert the skills and knowledge they have acquired while attending courses at KUIS. At the beginning of the teaching practicum are pre-conferences for 3 class hours in total, where students are given general guidelines about elementary schools, and they learn responsibilities, and expectations by hearing a talk of a supervisor from the municipal board of education with which KUIS collaborates. Detailed information about the elementary schools that KUIS students are designated to do the teaching practicum is also given to students at this time.

Elementary school teaching structure (style)

The teaching practicum is conducted in collaboration with a municipal board of education. The elementary schools under the supervision of the municipal board of education have been the MEXT's "designated schools" since 2007, and the elementary schools follow the curriculum developed by the board of education. The board of education has also developed its own teaching materials for the elementary schools, and elementary school teachers are required to use the material. Aims and objectives of the board of education are to teach English skills to elementary school children so that they will enhance their basic communicative skills. While the MEXT's policy strictly forbids teaching linguistics forms, such as the grammar of English, the "designated schools" are given leeway as to what to teach and how to teach them.

As Fig. 1 shows, the elementary schools engage in three-person collaborative English teaching. The board of education encourages homeroom teachers (HRTs) to take the lead and assistant language teachers (ALTs) and Japanese assistant teachers (JATs) to support the HRTs. In reality, however, the ALTs take the lead, and the HRTs and JATs support the ALTs, as HRTs are not qualified English teachers, and their English abilities and skills for teaching English are generally low. KUIS students participate in the three person collaborative teaching as supporters of HRTs, ALTs, and JATs. Therefore, four teachers (including KUIS student teachers) engage in teaching classes of about 30 elementary school students.

KUIS students are sent to elementary schools through the system called "Learning Supporter" system. This is a learning support system the board of education adopts to help special needs students and students with learning

disabilities. Supporters also help slow learners individually. The teaching practicum usually requires student teachers to experience teaching, but because there is no official “English class” in the current elementary school educational system, both KUIS and the board of education take advantage of such a system. That is, this system allows KUIS students to participate in English classes and help teach children English, while the elementary schools can benefit from having young people who are proficient in English to help elementary school students learn English. Because no one is capable of advising student teachers, KUIS teaching practicum instructors visit each elementary school to give direct advice to KUIS students.

Collaborative EFL teaching

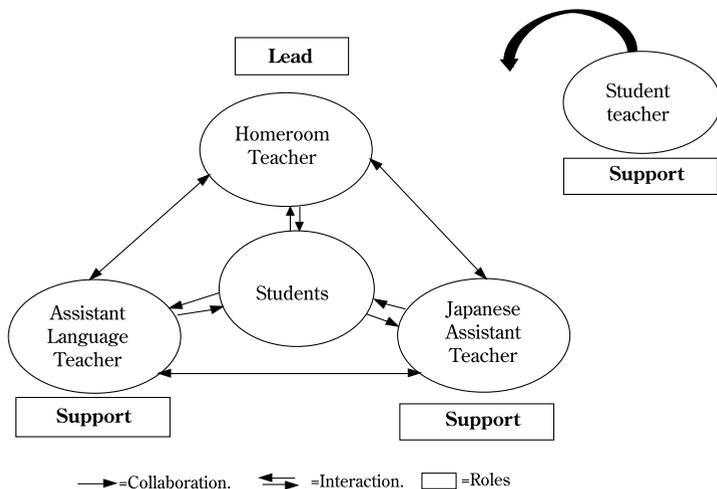


Fig. 1 Collaborative EFL teaching at elementary schools

5. Methodology

1) The purpose of the study

The teacher training program was adopted in 2004 by the English department in KUIS and was implemented in the following academic year. The present researcher aimed to examine two aspects about the program: 1) if the students are satisfied with the program since it has been implemented; 2) if the curriculum has problems, what could be done to improve the program. The researcher also attempted to identify the concerns of students, and the current sociopolitical situations in elementary schools.

2) Participants

In March 2008, 26 students graduated from KUIS completing all the course work, and among those, 13 received the program certificate. Only half of the students satisfied the English language requirement (TOEIC 730, TOEFL 550, and Eiken Pre-1st grade); however, the graduates can fulfill the requirement and the university grants a certificate if they submit an official passing score within a year after graduation. A questionnaire was sent in March to all the 26 graduating students by mail to their residence after completing the program, and 18 of them returned the questionnaire. The survey, therefore, includes both those who earned a certificate and those who did not because they did not fulfill the English requirement.

3) Methods

In order to examine whether the students in the program were satisfied with the program, an inventory of the evaluation instruments was taken and to gather

information, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire consists of four categories: [A] students' personal information, [B] course evaluation by the students, [C] current situation about elementary schools, and [D] students' perceptions about elementary school teachers' English abilities and teaching skills. The questions about the course evaluation include the students' overall satisfaction about the program, perceptions about what needs to be improved about the program, and confidence to teach at elementary schools, among other question. Questions about elementary schools investigated the current teaching situations in elementary schools: teaching structure/style, collaborating teachers' roles in teaching English, use of the mother tongue, etc. The questionnaire includes 5 Likert scale questions, yes/no questions, and open-ended questions. This questionnaire was mailed in March 2008 to 26 graduating students who finished the program, and as mentioned above 18 (69%) responded. Since the purposes of the present study concern course evaluation, the researcher shall only report the results of [B] course evaluation by the students.

6. Results

The following questions were asked for the course evaluation. The summary of the results is shown in TABLE 2. Detailed explanations and reasons for Yes/No are described below TABLE 2.

Questions asked for the course evaluation:

- Q1. What are the two most important courses students need to take to be an elementary school English teacher?
- Q2. What are the skills you felt most needed to include in this program?

- Q3. What were the courses you felt were useful besides the courses in the Pre-service teacher-training program?
- Q4. How satisfied are you with the program?
- Q5. What could be improved about the program?
- Q6. Would you recommend the program to your friends or juniors at KUIS?
- Q7. Are you confident to teach English at an elementary school now that you have finished the program?
- Q8. Can you advertise the program to people outside of KUIS with confidence?
- Q9. What skills do you think you still lack and therefore want to learn?

TABLE 2 Summary of the results of the questionnaire

	First graduates (March 2007): Responses from 18/26 students
Q1	Teaching Practicum (88%), Methods* (61%), Curriculum Design (33%), Theories of Teaching English to Children (11%)
Q2	Classroom English, communication with children, classroom management, educational psychology about children
Q3	English proficiency courses, English qualification classes, psycholinguistics
Q4	83% (4:rather satisfied [11/18]+5:satisfied [4/18]), 17% (3/18) (rather unsatisfied)
Q5	Create a class to share problems and ideas with other student teachers, more hours for teaching practicum, more classes need to be offered, more practical courses, more lenient rules for prerequisites
Q6	Yes: 50%, Neither: 50%, No: 0%
Q7	Yes: 11% (2/18), Neither: 78%, No: 11%
Q8	Yes: 55%, Neither: 38%, No: 5% (1/18)
Q9	English abilities: 38%, teaching skills: 11%, knowledge about child development, communication skills with children, teaching methods, English language teaching situations in elementary schools, Phonics, teaching reading and writing

*Methods = Methods of Teaching English to Children

Students seem to be generally satisfied with the program. Eighty three percent (15 out of 18) answered 4 [relatively satisfied] (11/18) or 5 [satisfied] (4/18). Those who were “rather dissatisfied” commented, “The educational system was not well organized maybe because the teaching practicum just started this year,” “Most of the credits [we gained in this program] were not transferable as necessary credits for graduation,” and “What I learned at KUIS was not very useful in the field.” About the courses that they felt should be taken to teach English to children, the students responded Teaching Practicum: “Actually experiencing teaching English to children in elementary schools is important because teaching in front of children is different from teaching in front of college students,” “You learn how to deal with children [by actually experiencing the teaching practicum]” and through the teaching practicum, “we learn what’s really happening in elementary schools.” One student responded, “There are things that you cannot learn just from books, but only by being in the field,” and another student wrote, “By actually teaching children, you learn teaching skills, and you become more confident.” Methods of Teaching English to Children was another class the students responded to be one of the most useful courses. Some of the reasons why students so responded were, “We learned activities that are applicable in elementary schools,” “You can learn quite different learning methods [in this class] from the ones you learned in junior and senior high schools.” Curriculum Design was another class students responded as useful because they learned “how to write lesson plans, and create teaching materials.” Because practical courses are readily applicable, they are more preferred to theoretical courses, but one student who responded that Theories of Teaching English to Children was useful wrote, “I could acquire basic knowledge about children’s nature and how language is learned. Whenever I was

engaged in practical courses or in the teaching practicum, things I learned in this class came to mind.”

One interesting finding is that students felt that learning how to communicate with children is important. Students responded, “I want to learn how to interact with children as a teacher. I want to gain more knowledge about how to deal with children who have problems with their body and/or mind,” “I think it is very important to build a good relationship with children. I did not know how to communicate with children, so I wished that I knew before I started teaching,” and “We need to know more about elementary school children.” One other student responded, “We need to learn to manage children and classrooms. Teaching skills alone will not help us do this.”

With regard to changes they wish to make about the program, many stated that they needed a class to share problems and concerns they are experiencing at elementary schools while doing the teaching practicum. Students claimed that they do not have any place to improve teaching skills either by sharing ideas for teaching or by solving problems they face.

As for confidence in teaching, students responded they have not experienced enough to be confident in teaching English. One student responded, “We only know the elementary school where we had the teaching practicum.” indicating their knowledge is limited.

Whether they would recommend their friends to take the program, half of the students responded that they would, but half responded, “Neither” because “The program has a lot of requirements, and it takes time to complete it. Unless they are strongly motivated, I would not recommend it,” and “You learn a lot in this program, but the program does not officially qualify us to be an elementary school

teacher.” This also was a reason some of the students said they are not certain if they would advertise this program outside school.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the students who completed the program are satisfied with the program, but they still lack confidence about teaching children English. Some of the reasons derive from their perception that they do not have enough experience in teaching English to children, and others from their lack of knowledge about elementary school children in general. The students appreciate practical courses to be readily applicable to actual teaching, but they think the knowledge about games and activities alone will not help them know how to deal with children and manage classrooms.

It also was found from the research that the students faced various problems and were feeling very insecure while doing the teaching practicum. They demanded that KUIS create a class for those who are doing the practicum to share problems and concerns.

The program evaluation revealed three main issues to consider for curriculum revisions to make:

- (1) Create a class or two during the period of a teaching practicum for students to share problems and ideas to solve problems and improve their teaching skills.
- (2) Create a course that deals specifically with children’s development. The course should deal with children’s first and second language acquisition, physical, cognitive, memory, and social development so that the students will acquire knowledge about the nature of children for better communication with them and effective classroom management.

(3) Find ways for students to get an official qualification to teach in elementary schools and make it possible for the students to take both the pre-service teacher-training program and an elementary school teaching qualification. The first of the three issues has already been solved as of 2008 academic year. Students now are required to attend mid-term conferences for two class hours that are held while the teaching practicum is being held. Students are now also given opportunities to visit other elementary schools to gain more knowledge about elementary schools in general. The second and the third issues will be put into effect in the coming 2010 academic year. The details about those new attempts and revisions made by the researcher should be reported elsewhere in the future.

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