The Unresearched Language Lessons

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Abstract
Supplementary language lessons account for the majority of the English teaching hours in Japan by a wide margin, yet there has been little to no formal outside research performed on them. Much governmental legislation has been discussed, debated and approved about Jr. High school and High School curriculums and teaching methods. However without considering this context any education ministry mandates are questionable at best. The presenters have extensive experience both observing and teaching in this context, giving them unique insights into how students in primary and secondary education are actually taught. The presenters will discuss the results of observations of supplementary language lesson observations of random institutions as well as survey results, personal experiences, lesson types and focuses, and techniques used in this context in Japan and South Korea.

Keywords: Methodology, Supplementary Lessons, Context

1.0 Introduction
How can we make a real difference in language classes when we don’t even understand the teaching contexts? A standard education commonly entails that children from most countries attend public or private schools for twelve years. In many countries in Asia, 6 or more years of English language studies are required in those years. While it would of course be beneficial to upgrade the skills of the teachers of language classes in the private or public schools, it is the opinion of the authors that this system has gaps in research required to create real changes. In order to innovate the language learning system, especially for English, we must understand the entire system as a whole. Research must include supplementary language lectures.

1.1 Background
Every language teacher wants to make a major impact on the teaching practices of the host country. We all want to be better teachers, teaching what is most necessary to our students in the most efficient manner. Many of us believe that there is a better way to teach, and that the entire language education system needs adjusting in order for that to happen. The question is, what changes need to be made? How can we enact those changes in an efficient way? Although these questions cannot be answered within the scope of this report, it is the authors’ intention to provide a framework for getting started on how to begin getting the answers we seek.

One of the most basic things we should do when we start a curriculum, or even change the existing curriculum, is to do a formal environment analysis. An environmental analysis involves
looking at the factors for choosing what teachers do, including the physical facilities, the goals and objectives of the course, as well as content and assessments (Tessmer, 1990), also called a “constraints analysis” (Richards, 2001). Through this analysis, we can see more clearly the process of decision making, which leads to a more informed needs analysis.

Although the environment and needs analysis as outlined above are guidelines intended to be for a specific context and course or curriculum, in order to make a real impact on an entire nation’s education system we would need to do that on a much larger scale. However, the underlying principles are the same. We need to identify what is already happening in the current educational context, identify the reasons and processes by which this is happening, then follow up with a full needs analysis of the students.

1.2 Japan’s Political Educational Context

To gain insights into the educational situation of Japan from a political perspective, one should start with the official website of the governmental agency in charge of national policy, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, also known officially as MEXT. In Japan, education through Junior High School (ninth grade) is compulsory (MEXT, 2013). High school is not considered upper secondary school, and according to government reports, 96.3% of children enroll and graduate (MEXT, 2013.2). On MEXT’s English website are some broad general goals, as well as some reports on the results of the initiatives they determined in 2003 (MEXT, 2003). Where language learning or teaching is discussed on their website, one can find statistics, general outlines of goals, and a few specific ideas about elementary and secondary education, higher education and lifelong learning. In the Basic Act on Education (2006), the topics of Compulsory Education, School Education, Universities, and Private Schools are outlined. Also there is a heading for Teachers, Education in the Family, Early Childhood Education, Social Education, Partnership and Cooperation among Schools, Families, and Local Residents, Political Education and finally Religious Education.

Further looks into the Japanese version of the same website (MEXT, 2003) gives a great deal of insight into the workings of the ministry. Of note, is the video included in the page titled “Regional Forum on Higher Education Reform” (Translation from Japanese) in which they ask various university professors and students their views on University Education. Although a few of the students view their education as a valuable tool for a future career, they nearly all said that they didn’t understand the relationship between what they studied as compulsory subjects and what they felt they needed for their future jobs. They stated that the majority of the time they spent in classes after their compulsory subjects were finished, they were given too many subjects that were designed to help them find a new job, but not enough time in classes that actually taught them the skills they would need once they got it. In the end of the video, the head of the Ministry of Education Yuichiro Yasunishi, sums up the ministry’s response. In essence, he states
that a college is a place where information is disseminated. Students and teachers are both researchers and should walk the path to greater understanding together.

Even a cursory analysis shows that the education of Japan, particularly as pertains to English language education, is not sufficient to meet the expectations of current and future students. An examination of the sources of information the ministry is drawing on reveals that they mainly (possibly exclusively) rely on input from select current or future students, teachers and ministerial experts. Michael Long (Long, 2001) states that there is danger in using only these sources. Pre-service or in-service informants may make a helpful contribution to a means analysis, but are unlikely to have the capacity for determining the results of a needs analysis. There is no data showing the qualifications of the ministerial experts towards an educational context analysis, so one can only wonder at how the educational needs of Japanese students are being determined.

1.3 The South Korean Political Educational Perspective

According to the Education Reform Agenda by MEST (The Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology), the Korean government supports and strengthens the public school system. First, MEST promotes public schools, strives to improve the school grading system and strengthens career education. Second it tries to improve teacher’s competency and increase parents’ participation. These systems give more autonomy to public schools. In addition MEST has a lot of detailed systems for various students in South Korea to have equal, and customized educational opportunities.

For English education, the ministry plans to expand teachers who can teach English using only English. It is because these days Korea’s English education has changed from grammar and reading to a speaking-oriented system. Also the ministry revises English textbooks to meet students’ new needs. Additionally it plans to make a more English-friendly classroom environment in public schools in order for students to feel more comfortable enough to speak English. In accordance with these policies MEST encourages students to use EBS (Korean Educational Broadcasting System) to study English. Mainly MEST’s English education goal is to narrow the gap of English education opportunities between students and push students to speak English through many public school programs.

Since Korea is language context removed for English (EFL), students need a different environment to speak and practice English. That is why and how numerous supplementary English schools have sprung up all around the nation. Statistics show that 71.7% of students in Korea go to private supplementary school, even though public schools already have after school programs for English with low prices (Statistics Korea, 2011). It tells us that there are many systems for English education in public schools but also there is more need for students and parents. Supplementary schools have more specific and detailed curriculums for English education, however MEST does not mention supplementary schools in Korea.
Korea’s public English education starts from third grade of elementary school and it goes until high school. Some parents think this is not enough for their children, which is why numerous English kindergartens have sprung up around the nation. Public schools hire native English speaking teachers for students to have more opportunities for speaking English since Korea is an English context removed country. However it is really hard for one native teacher to teach oral English to many students in the classroom. On the other hand private supplementary schools hire enough native teachers to manage each classroom so they can teach students and maintain proper levels. Also supplementary school curriculums vary more widely than public schools. Most franchise supplementary school’s curriculums are divided into four sections such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which differs from public schools.

1.4 Supplementary School Information
In short, both Japan’s and South Korea’s ministries of education are working to improve education but what sources they are using to assess the needs of the students, and who is doing the assessments, and on what sets of data is largely unknown. That said, as Chambers (1980) says in his study, “Whoever studies needs largely determines which needs are determined”. Although the means of determining the needs of students may be in question, this is not sufficient evidence that the system is not working. To determine this, we should look at the results on a comparative scale.

As we are focusing mainly on the English teaching system, we should compare the results of standardized tests, as they may be the best indicator we can get. Taking the example of the three Asian countries most relevant to this report, Japan, South Korea and Thailand, it is clear that there is room for improvement in teaching English. According to the EF English Proficiency Index for 2012 (EF, 2012), Japan ranks right behind South Korea. Japan is number 22, while South Korea is number 21. Unfortunately, Thailand ranks fifty-three out of the fifty-four countries listed. These rankings are not absolute, however. Thai speakers did much better than Japanese speakers in the TOEFL test on average, while again, South Korea was much better than either (ETS, 2011). Of course there are sampling issues with using standardized tests such as these, however one can get an ample image of how these countries are doing in general compared to each other.

How can we make meaningful progress in education, when the current teaching context is already poorly understood? In 2003, MEXT came out with new mandates for English teachers in Junior High schools as well as High schools in Japan. From the dialogs with MEXT in public forums, it was clear that the ministry assumed that all, or at least a great majority of the schools had complied with these mandates. However, some research showed that these mandates were not only poorly understood and disseminated, but were also largely ignored (Sorensen, 1998).

2.0 Pilot Studies
Further research brings up an even bigger issue than this. On average, 30.1% of English Language instruction before university is not held in elementary, junior high or high schools. They are in the form of supplementary language lessons. In a pilot study, out of 122 university students of the authors, 115 of them reported attending these supplementary language lessons. The actual time per student in English classes in formal schools varied widely, with an average of 1416.4 hours per student. 610.2 class hours was the average for supplementary language lessons before university. The majority of these extra classes are designed to help students pass the English tests administered in their formal schools, and for help with the entrance examinations of high schools and universities. Very few of the classes students attended were intended as communicative language courses.

Left with this huge gap in research on actual conditions in primary through high schools, the authors feel that the first step in making real progress in language education is to first describe accurately what is happening in the educational context. Literature describing education, language teaching practices and contexts are overwhelmingly reported at the tertiary level. The reason for this is simple. Colleges and universities have rewards and budgets for teachers that publish. High schools and junior high schools as well as primary schools normally do not. Teachers at this level in Japan are generally overburdened by school meetings, club activities and many other duties in addition to their regular classes, and without research budgets and the possibility of advancement through publication, as well as a host of privacy issues, there is little or no reason to make the attempt. Thus we have a number of data sampling problems even for the formal education system.

In order to address these issues, the authors will describe typical teaching practices found in Japan and South Korea. These descriptions are the results of both personal experience, as both of the authors have taught such classes, and as passive observers in random English classes taught by teachers native to the host country.

2.1 Methods of Pilot Observations
In both Japan and South Korea, supplementary classes were observed and careful notes taken. The focus on these observations was on English classes taught by teachers native to the host country. The classes were supplementary in nature, being overtly designed to increase the scores on their daily homework and test scores, or to raise their entrance exam scores for high school or university. The classes were chosen randomly and not in advance as much as possible. This is in an attempt to ensure that the observed classes were not specially prepared for the observer, and were in fact good representations of ordinary classes. The observers simply found supplementary language classes by walking down busy streets known to have these kinds of classes, and walking in unannounced, then asking politely for permission to observe the next class. This protocol was followed in both countries.
3.0 Educational Context of Supplementary Language Lessons in Japan (Juku)
Supplementary classes observed in Japan were surprisingly compliant to a stereotype of supplementary language lessons. In each case there was nearly no use of English at all. Instructions were all in Japanese, and were lectures on grammar. Classes begin with a follow-up on previous homework, which often meant the teacher simply asked if the students did it. In some cases they were asked if they were able to complete their regular school homework, and in rare cases the teacher asked to see some of what they had done as homework. There was no content involved with sentence samples, only discrete grammar items, which were written on the board, the pattern explained in Japanese, then with few or no questions, the teacher moved on to the next grammar item. In very few classes, the teacher used a CD recording which had an English listening section. The listening section was directly from the students’ high school exams from class, or from the previous year’s entrance exams. By far, the most common exercise was fill-in-the-blanks on worksheets with isolated grammar patterns. Frequently the teacher would ask the students questions while lecturing, however the teacher would then answer all the questions without waiting for students’ responses. Classrooms were arranged in a classic style, with desks in rows and students sitting densely packed facing the whiteboard in front of the room. There are no posters on the walls except for a few notices from the school. If there is any equipment, it is a portable CD player that the teacher brought. Although the overt purpose of these classes in Japan is to assist students on tests and class work, most students seem to treat these classes as a chance to socialize and only become serious about the studies in the days before tests. Students often choose their supplementary school according to which one their best friends attend. In general, students who are not having fun in class or having enough socialization outside of class will either change supplementary schools or stop going and study at home. The view of junior high and high schools is as a place where the students go to get their assignments. Supplementary schools are where they go to primarily socialize, and secondarily to learn how to do their assignments.

3.1 The Observer’s Effects
While observing, the students seemed quite well focused on the lecture, taking notes but covert observations showed that many of the notes taken by the students were not accurately reflecting what the teacher was attempting to explain. It is the observer’s opinion in some cases that the students are used to asking each other questions about what they did not understand, or to simply ignore it, but as they were being observed, they were in some cases trying to appear more serious than usual. A few of the teachers also asked the observer to stand and demonstrate proper pronunciation of a few isolated words that are rather more difficult. The observers tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, while cooperating with the teacher. In many cases the teacher mentioned feeling nervous about being observed, but still tried to do a normal class. It is likely that some students felt the same.

3.2 Other Information Outside of the Class
Whenever possible, the observers requested a few minutes of questions before the course and after. Although this was difficult in many cases as the teachers often needed to run to their next class or from a previous one, they were often informative. Although it is likely that there are many teachers in this context that have some training or background in language teaching, the observers have not had the experience of finding one to observe in Japan. Teachers are generally university graduates with a four year degree in something other than language. Their English is generally very poor and in some cases asked their students to translate for the observers, as some students had higher skills in productive English than the teacher. As yet, no teachers were able to effectively converse with the observer in the target language, all resorting to their mother tongue.

4.0 Educational Context of Supplementary Language Lessons in South Korea (Hagwon)

Although some of the classes observed were identical to those observed in Japan, there was surprising variety in the lessons and facilities. Lessons were at a very quick pace, with very little time for reflective answers by students in most classes. Students in such classes were very deeply focused and highly interactive. Although these classes are supplemental in nature, many of them focus on taking the TOEIC test. While most of the functional language in classes was in their mother tongue, there was some functional language in the target language commonly followed by a translation. In the lecture, teachers spoke mainly in the mother tongue, but rates between thirty to fifty percent in the target language were not uncommon. A few classes that were observed were completely in the target language, including student responses. Lectures focused more on individual vocabulary more often than in Japan, though some were based on discrete grammar points. Every class observed in Korea had a great deal more student interaction than in Japan. Facilities were similar in style to Japan’s classrooms. Desks or tables were in rows in most cases; however, there were a few rooms where students were seated around one large table facing each other, with the teacher in front. Some classrooms were equipped with media equipment including smart boards and large computer monitors. The students’ motives for taking the courses appear to contrast with Japan’s, in that the classes are much more results oriented. If students or their parents do not feel they are getting the high scores they could be getting, they will quickly change to a different supplementary school, regardless of which supplementary school their friends attend.

4.1 The Observer’s Effects

As in the observations in Japan, the observer tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. While in most classes the observer was able to quietly sit in a back corner and take notes, in some classes, the observer was asked to model some sentences or words for the class. In many classes the observer was asked to give a brief self-introduction to the class in the target language. This seemed to help the students focus on the observer less. In a few cases, one or two students
would ask the observer many questions during the lecture, but mostly about the content of the lesson being taught.

4.2 Other Information from Outside the Class
In contrast to Japanese teachers, the teachers in Korea nearly all had some sort of language teaching qualifications or training. Many had been exchange students in an English speaking country, many were English or TESOL majors, or at least had a certificate in TESOL. All the teachers that had time for questions reported some qualifications and / or training in language teaching. Most of them were sufficiently proficient to converse in the target language with the observer, and many were quite fluent.

4.3 Course Design
In both countries, the courses appear to be designed primarily around the items expected to be difficult on upcoming tests. While most are derived from actual tests then supplementary materials are created in order to present the target structures or vocabulary, some are strictly following textbooks designed for that class’s stated purpose.

4.4 Conclusions
All the studies and information above lead to the same implications. We do not really know nor understand the language education system as a whole. As long as supplementary language lessons are ignored by the government entities, they will also not understand the education system, and further mandates, programs, curriculum directives and training programs will not make real, significant changes. There is a gap in our research that should not be ignored, and any graduate students looking for a research area would do the field a service by filling in some of these blanks.

5.0 References:


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