

**Korean elementary school teachers' concerns towards current English teaching practice: Competencies that they think they "have" and "don't have"**

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Abstract

As a response to growing use of English as a medium of international and global communication, a number of substantial changes have been made in various East Asian countries with respect to their English language policies at the elementary school level. The present study looks at the case of Korean elementary school teachers to better illustrate this phenomenon. This study identifies their concerns and needs with respect to current English teaching practice as they grapple with rapid changes in language education policies. Based on both survey research (for which a total of 204 elementary school teachers in Seoul gave responses) and interviews with select teachers, the author found that teachers saw a gap between their current English competencies and those necessary to teach in productive domains (i.e., speaking and writing). It was found that teachers were greatly concerned about implementing English at the elementary school levels, and that they were particularly concerned (and perceived the greatest need) when it came to improving instructional competencies for teaching oral skills, developing effective activities and lesson plans, teaching students with diverse proficiency levels, and teaching English solely through the medium of English. The study conducted herein suggests the importance of incorporating teachers' concerns and needs into language policies and practice, as well as the necessity of supporting teachers in order to effectively implement English language instruction at the elementary school level in East Asia.

Purpose of the present study

In response to the growing need to prepare children for an increasingly global society, various East Asian governments (including Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) have changed their language policies regarding the introduction of English language education. One such change was the introduction of English language education at the elementary school level. Since English language education at the elementary school level is still in its infancy in such countries, and is being established in many aspects via trial and error, the teachers who are supposed to implement such policies have been faced with a number of changes in both the environment in which they work as well as in the goals they are being asked to achieve. Some of the more predominant changes they have been faced with include : (1) the stage at which English education begins has been repeatedly pushed down to younger and younger grades; (2) various governments have signaled their plans to hire more and more native-English speakers as their English teachers; (3) various pedagogical changes have been proposed. The types of changes proposed in various states include: shifting the focus of English learning from literacy and grammar focused

activities to a focus on communicative aspects; transitioning from teacher-centered pedagogical activities to student-centered approaches; focusing increasingly on task-based activities; introducing English-only instruction; increasing the use of technology in the classroom; and so forth.

As one can easily imagine, it has not been easy for teachers to catch up with such rapid policy changes. In many cases, regular classroom teachers who have not been trained to teach English are being asked to teach English. Moreover, since English language education in these countries had traditionally focused on reading, writing, and grammar, oral communicative skills have traditionally been considered to be one of the weakest skills among teachers as well as students. And it is precisely those skills that teachers have been suggested to focus on teaching in their English classes under the new policies.

While a number of major changes in English educational policies in Asia have been reported, very little is known about how these new systems are to be implemented, what challenges and problems will emerge from their implementation, and how effective these new systems will be at teaching English. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to understand teachers' perceptions towards English language education at the elementary school level in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, and to identify their concerns and needs regarding current practice in the midst of rapid changes in language policy. One can consider the study conducted herein to be a needs analysis, and the information gathered herein should be very useful for future curricula and material development, as well as for developing and improving in-service teachers' training (Nunan, 1988). Since English language education at the elementary school level is relatively new in many EFL contexts, and especially so in East Asia, such information has yet to be sufficiently gathered and reported, despite the pressing need to do so. The information reported herein for the case of Korea represents one of the leading cases in East Asia and is part of a larger cross-national project investigating English language education at the elementary school level in various East Asian countries being conducted by the author.

The Setting: Korean English language educational policy at the elementary school level  
In Korea, English language instruction at public elementary schools was first officially introduced as an academic subject in 1997. English language instruction was introduced at that time at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level, and since 2000, all students in grade levels 3 to 6 have been receiving English language instruction. Grades 3 and 4 received a 40-minute lesson each week (34 lessons per year) and Grades 5 and 6 received two 40-minute lessons per week (68 lessons per year) in 2002.

Previous English language education (at the secondary level and up) had been the constant target of criticism for being too focused on grammar and reading and writing. The Seventh National Curriculum for English, announced in 1997, sought to address this by placing an emphasis on the acquisition of oral communicative skills. The objectives of English language education at the elementary school level were defined as being two-fold: namely, to enhance students' interests in English and to develop basic communicative competence (Ministry of Education, 1996). A variety of new instructional methodologies were suggested for enhancing English classes, including using a comprehension-focused natural approach, a total physical response approach, a

task-based approach, as well as incorporating role playing, games, chants and songs into classroom activities. Teachers were suggested to employ learner-centered instruction, discovery-based learning, and individual-based instruction rather than standardized instruction and assessments (Kim, 2002). Moreover, the government announced in 2001 that a one-hour, once-per week English class for grades 3 to 6 has to be taught only through the medium of English by 2002.

Under the Seventh National Curriculum for English, reading and writing activities are to be kept to a minimum at the elementary school level, and actual language usage rather than simply written language usage should be the primary goal. Teachers may introduce the English alphabets at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade; however, written activities are not to exceed more than 10% of their lesson time. Even for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders, the curriculum clearly specifies that written language should be secondary to oral language development.

Since 2001, there has been only one textbook that was approved by the Ministry of Education, and elementary schools are required to use that textbook. Various supplemental materials, including audio-tapes and CD-ROMs, were also developed.

English language classes are taught by native Korean teachers. The majority of such teachers are regular classroom teachers who have not been specifically trained to be English teachers. Some teachers (mostly younger, newer teachers) have received pre-service training on English teaching, and some teachers who formerly taught English at the secondary level have started teaching English at the elementary school level. Native speakers of English have rarely been used in regular Korean public elementary schools under the present system, although the government is planning to hire some native speakers in the future. In order to prepare Korean teachers to teach English in their classrooms, the Korean government requires all elementary school teachers to take a 120-hour in-service teachers' training program wherein teachers can take a series of courses on English conversation, English language pedagogy, and educational psychology and philosophy.

Besides receiving English language education at school, many students in Korea receive some form of additional English language instruction. And as will be discussed below, that has yielded substantial variation in students' English proficiency. Should the reader be so inclined, further information on language planning in Korea can be found in Jung and Norton (2002).

#### A note about criteria: the qualities attributable to good language teachers

In order to understand the effectiveness of Korean elementary school teachers in teaching English, it would be helpful to first establish a benchmark against which to compare their performance. A natural benchmark would be to define what constitutes a "good language teacher" in the first place (a goal expressed by many of the teachers identified in this study). The qualifications or competencies needed to be a "good language teacher" have been identified and listed in a variety of different ways. Identification of such competencies can be used as the basis for curriculum development for teachers' training, setting standards, and for other purposes central to English language education. (It is important to note that competencies as identified in the present context do not refer to native speakers' linguistic competencies as used in the Chomskyan sense.) For example, Pinthou (1979) stated that "language," "teaching," and "love" are all important qualifications for good teachers. Allen (1980, cited in Brown, 2001, p. 429)

listed nine competencies for “good language teachers”: competent preparation leading to a degree in TESL; a love of the English language; critical thinking; the persistent urge to improve oneself; self-subordination; readiness to go the extra mile; cultural adaptability; professional citizenship; and a feeling of excitement about one’s work. In addition to the three competencies that Met (1989) identified (namely, “competencies in the general areas of education, interpersonal skills, and professional education” (p. 177)), Peyton (1997) recognized seven more competencies including a high level of proficiency in the target language, knowledge of the cultures and societies of the target language, knowledge of technologies, pedagogical knowledge, and so forth. Yet another example of the types of qualifications identified for competent English language instruction can be seen in the “Elementary School (K-8) Foreign Language Teacher Education Curriculum” developed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Center for Applied Linguistics (1992). This document identifies 14 separate competencies for curriculum development for teacher education. Similarly, Brown (2001) created a checklist for teachers in which thirty competencies were identified.

From such lists of what it takes to be a “good foreign language teacher”, one may extract the following criteria as being required in the EFL context:

- (1) Proficiency-based competencies and qualities (e.g., proficiency in the targeted language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing).
- (2) Knowledge-based competencies (e.g., knowledge of pragmatics, knowledge of language acquisition and linguistic theories, knowledge of the targeted society and culture, and (for English teachers in particular) knowledge of global issues and of the broader world).
- (3) Instructional competencies: language instruction skills and general instructional skills (e.g., skills in employing various pedagogical methodologies, classroom management skills, etc.).
- (4) Personal and interpersonal-based competencies (e.g., a friendly personality, flexibility, a sense of humor).

All of these competencies constitute important qualifications for good language teachers. However, one can hypothesize that the degree of importance of these competencies may vary depending on the goals for learning the target language, the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place, and the characteristics of the learners as well as of the teachers. As such, we may surmise that the identification of those competencies most critical for good language teaching needs to be done based on the context in which such teaching takes place.

#### Research questions

The purpose of the present study is to understand how Korean elementary school teachers rate their competencies as foreign language teachers in light of both the socio-cultural environment in which they work as well as educational policies which they have been asked to implement. With this in mind, the present study also tries to elicit what competencies these teachers think they possess currently and what competencies they believe they need to acquire in order to teach effectively. The study aims to identify both their concerns as well as their perceived needs for implementing the recently introduced policies for English language education at the elementary school level.

In order to understand teachers' perceptions, an extended survey was prepared in the Korean language and was distributed among elementary school teachers. In addition to this survey, select teachers were interviewed in order to provide more in-depth information about teachers' concerns towards implementing English language education at the elementary school level.

#### Participants and methodology

Two hundred and four elementary school teachers (teaching at grade levels 1 to 6) who are currently teaching in Seoul responded to the survey. They were all regular classroom teachers who attended in-service teachers' training in Seoul during the summer of 2002. All public elementary school teachers in Korea have been required to take in-service teachers' training on English language teaching by the government, and the author surveyed the respondents during one such training program. With the help of a training organizer, 250 survey copies were distributed and 204 teachers completed and handed in surveys to the training organizer (yielding a response rate of 85%). The survey contained items addressing their perceptions and attitudes towards various aspects of English teaching, and in total the survey took 30 to 40 minutes on average for the teachers to complete. Select items from the survey will be the subject of our analysis in the present study.

More than 80% of the respondents were young female teachers in their twenties and thirties. The average years of teaching experience (not only for English but for other subjects as well) was 13.5 years; however, 70.3% of the respondents had been teaching for less than 5 years. This last statistic reflects the fact that younger teachers were encouraged by schools to receive their training first. The average English class size that the teachers had been teaching was 37.0 students.

The majority of such teachers had experienced minimal direct contact with native English speakers in professional contexts. Only 8 teachers out of the 204 respondents had studied English in an English speaking country. Only 3 teachers indicated that they worked with native English speaking teachers.

In addition to the survey, three public elementary school teachers in Seoul were asked to participate in interviews. One was a young teacher who received some English pre-service training and who had been teaching for three years (referred to as Ms. A hereafter). Another was an experienced, formal English teacher at a junior high school who had been teaching English at an elementary school for the last three years (Ms. B). The last teacher was an experienced regular classroom teacher who had started teaching English five years ago (Ms. C). The author first observed their English classes, and immediately following such classroom observation, they were asked a number of questions as part of an interview covering their concerns about teaching English.

#### Results

The results of the study will be reported in the following order: (1) teachers' general attitudes towards English language education at the elementary school level in its current state; (2) their perspectives on the goals of English language education in Korea; (3) their perceived English language competencies; (4) their perceptions of the competencies required of English teachers; and (5) competencies that they wish to improve upon and their primary concerns regarding the current practice of English language education at the

elementary school level in Korea. The results presented below expand upon this last point in particular and address some of the changes that the participants in this study (both those teachers surveyed as well as those interviewed) saw as necessary in order to achieve on a practical level the Korean government's goals for English language education at the elementary school level.

#### Teachers' attitudes towards English language education at the elementary school level

The teachers were asked to judge the degree of agreement for a number of statements regarding English language education at the elementary school level, using a 7-point scale (where 1 was "strongly disagree" and 7 was "strongly agree"). As the results of Q1 and Q2 in Table 1 indicate, the majority of the teachers indicated some level of agreement with the introduction of English language education at the elementary school level, but they did not necessarily see a need to increase the amount of English education from the current status quo. Many of them strongly disagreed with content-based instruction in English at the elementary school level (Q3). More than half of the teachers also disagreed with instructional strategies where only English is used as the medium of instruction (Q5); teachers instead tended to think it better to use the students' first language as the medium of instruction in English classes (Q4). In sum, the teachers seemed to generally agree with the current form of English language education at elementary schools (i.e. one hour per week of instruction of English as a foreign language for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders and two hours per week for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders).

Table 1

Teachers' attitudes towards issues related to English language education at the elementary school level

	Mean	Distribution (% of valid N)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Q1: It is good to introduce English at the elementary school level	4.57 N=195	7 3.6%	11 25.6%	25 12.8%	43 22.1%	56 28.7%	35 17.9%	18 9.2%
Q2: We should increase the number of hours for English at the elementary school level.	3.80 N=193	17 8.8%	19 9.8%	36 18.7%	65 33.7%	32 16.6%	17 8.8%	7 3.6%
Q3: Elementary schools should try to teach content subjects such as math and science in English as well.	2.20 N=195	93 47.7%	32 16.4%	24 12.3%	33 16.9%	11 5.6%	1 0.5%	1 0.5%
Q4: The effective use of students' native language (Korean) in English language classes can enhance their English learning.	4.45 N=193	3 1.6%	14 7.3%	27 14.0%	51 26.4%	58 30.1%	28 14.5%	12 6.2%
Q5: English language instruction should be conducted only through English.	3.50 N=192	11 5.7%	30 15.6%	65 33.9%	42 21.9%	30 15.6%	10 5.2%	4 2.1%

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Moderately disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Neutral, 5 = Slightly agree, 6 = Moderately agree, and 7 = Strongly agree

The perceived goals of English language education

Under the current system, what do teachers perceive to be the goals of English language education? Both long-term (goals to be achieved by high school graduation) and short-term goals (achieved at the elementary school level) were investigated. The results are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. A number of goal-related statements were judged by the teachers using a 7-point scale (where 1 was “not appropriate as a goal”, and 7 was “everybody should achieve this goal.”)

Table 2

Teachers' perceptions of the goals of English language education in Korea (long-term and short-term goals)

	Mean	Distribution (% of valid N)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To read simple email messages	4.09	0%	9.5%	22.5%	32.5%	23.0%	10.5%	2.0%
To carry on basic conversation	4.00	0%	11.0%	25.5%	29.3%	23.8%	9.8%	1.2%
To listen and comprehend daily conversation	3.94	0.5%	8.5%	29.4%	31.8%	19.4%	9.5%	1.0%
To write simple email messages	3.75	0.5%	15.6%	30.7%	25.1%	18.6%	9.0%	0.5%
To read English newspapers and comprehend much of them	3.34	3.5%	21.5%	32.5%	26.5%	12.5%	3.5%	0%
To acquire native-like pronunciation	3.28	9.0%	22.0%	27.5%	23.0%	13.0%	3.0%	2.5%
To watch English TV and comprehend much of it	3.01	8.5%	25.6%	37.2%	17.1%	8.5%	3.0%	0%
To acquire enough oral skills to conduct business and other professional meetings	2.84	12.9%	28.9%	29.4%	20.9%	6.5%	1.5%	0%
To acquire enough writing skills to write opinion letters to newspapers and magazines	2.81	13.9%	34.8%	21.9%	18.9%	7.0%	3.0%	0.5%
To negotiate business or other professional matters by email in English	2.74	17.5%	33.5%	21.5%	16.0%	8.5%	2.5%	0.5%

Note: 1 = Not appropriate, 2 = 10% of Koreans should achieve this goal, 3 = 35% of Koreans should achieve this goal, 4 = 50% of Koreans should achieve this goal, 5 = 65% of Koreans should achieve this goal, 6 = 90% of Koreans should achieve this goal, and 7 = Everybody should achieve this goal.

For long-term goals, as one might expect, relatively high ratings were found when teachers were asked about students' acquisition of basic daily conversational skills. Interestingly, due to a rapid expansion of Internet-based exchange across countries, the ability to read and write simple email messages in English was also given numerous higher ratings. Among oral skills, the acquisition of native-like pronunciation did not seem to be a major goal for the teachers, and nearly 60% of the teachers responded with a

ranking of lower than 3. With regards to the short-term goals of English language education, the Korean teachers sampled rated oral communicative goals as being of more importance than reading and writing (with the exception of the acquisition of native-like pronunciation, which was ranked lowest). The teachers also felt that goals related to motivational factors (i.e., making students interested in English-speaking cultures and society) were more important than acquiring reading and writing at the elementary school level. In sum, teachers see the primary goals of English education at the elementary school level as being the acquisition of basic oral communication proficiency (with the acquisition of native-like pronunciation being a notable exception). Enhancing students' motivation to learn English was also considered to be an important goal of elementary school English education.

Table 3  
Teachers' perceptions of the goals of English language education in Korea (short-term goals)

	Mean	Distribution (% of valid N)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To listen to greetings and standard expressions	4.52	0.5%	10.5%	14.5%	22.0%	22.0%	24.5%	6.0%
To greet and say some standard expressions	4.35	1.0%	6.0%	19.4%	28.4%	25.9%	14.9%	4.5%
To be interested in English-speaking cultures and people	4.31	2.0%	9.0%	20.0%	22.5%	24.5%	15.5%	6.5%
To listen and comprehend simple stories	4.04	1.5%	10.1%	24.2%	27.3%	23.7%	10.1%	3.0%
To be able to carry on simple conversations	3.71	2.5%	15.9%	24.4%	32.8%	15.9%	6.5%	2.0%
To read some words and phrases	3.66	3.5%	14.4%	27.9%	29.9%	18.4%	3.5%	2.5%
To spell some words and phrases	3.64	4.0%	14.9%	31.8%	21.9%	18.9%	6.5%	2.0%
To be interested in foreigners in the community and world affairs	3.64	7.0%	18.4%	20.4%	26.4%	15.9%	9.5%	2.5%
To read some short stories	3.58	4.0%	16.5%	30.0%	24.5%	19.0%	4.5%	1.5%
To sound out English words accurately (i.e., to acquire basic decoding skills)	3.49	5.5%	15.0%	32.5%	27.0%	14.0%	4.5%	1.5%
To write some short stories	3.13	11.0%	23.5%	28.0%	22.0%	11.5%	3.0%	1.0%
To acquire native-like pronunciation	3.07	14.9%	28.4%	16.9%	19.9%	14.9%	4.0%	1.0%

Note: 1 = Not appropriate, 2 = 10% of students should achieve this goal, 3 = 35% of students should achieve this goal, 4 = 50% of students should achieve this goal, 5 = 65% of students should achieve this goal, 6 = 90% of students should achieve this goal, and 7 = Everybody should achieve this goal.

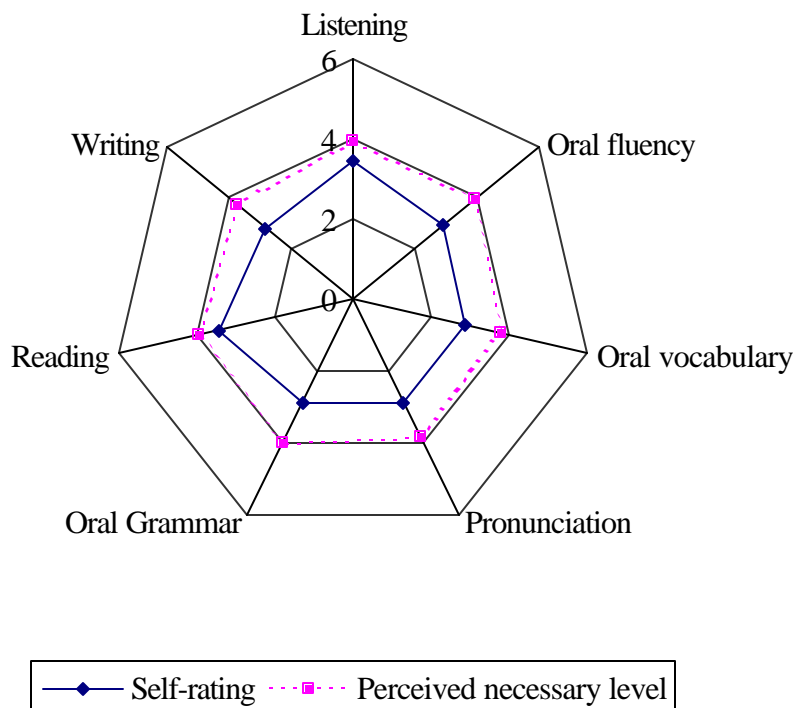
Teachers' perceptions of proficiency-based competencies: current levels versus needed levels

In order to reach the goals discussed above, what competencies do teachers perceive they need to have? Researchers such as Murdoch (1994) have observed that high proficiency in the targeted language is “the most valued aspect of a non-native teacher’s competence” (p. 253). With this in mind, the author examined how the Korean teachers in the present study perceived their own levels of proficiency as well as the levels that they thought necessary to teach English effectively.

Items from the Stanford Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix (FLOSEM) (Padilla, Sung, & Aninao, 1997) were employed for assessing oral proficiency. This matrix has been used as a guideline by teachers in order to assess their students’ oral proficiency through observation. It has also been used by adult learners for self-assessment of their own oral skills. Thus, in the present study, the teachers were asked to self-rate their oral proficiency (on six levels) in five domains (listening comprehension, oral fluency, vocabulary in speech, pronunciation, and grammar in speech) using FLOSEM. Since FLOSEM was designed to measure oral proficiency only, measures for reading and writing were developed by the author, using scales equivalent to those employed on FLOSEM.

In addition to self-rating their proficiency, the teachers were also asked to indicate the minimum levels in each domain that teachers who teach English at the elementary school level need to have. The FLOSEM and the reading and writing matrix developed for the present study are shown in the Appendix.

Figure 1 Korean elementary school teachers’ English proficiencies



It is important to note that what were obtained for this study were the teachers' self-rated proficiency levels, not their objective proficiencies. However, this information can serve as an indicator of the teachers' current levels of English proficiency. Also, this information serves as a baseline in order to understand the gap that teachers' perceive to exist between what competencies they think they currently have and what competencies they believe they need in order to teach English effectively.

Korean teachers rated their own listening comprehension skills higher than their other production-based oral skills. Similarly, they rated their reading comprehension skills higher than their writing skills. Interestingly, as can be seen in Figure 1, what the teachers thought they needed to have in order to teach English at the elementary school level was not necessarily a very high proficiency level (rather, it was an intermediate level of proficiency). However, the teachers thought they need to have balanced proficiencies in all domains: they felt they needed not only certain levels of oral proficiencies but also equivalent levels of reading and writing proficiencies, even though reading and writing are not emphasized in the curriculum at the elementary school level. As a result, there were no significant differences between their perceived current competency levels and the levels necessarily in receptive skills (i.e., the listening comprehension and reading comprehension domains). However, there were significant differences in productive skill domains (both in oral and writing skills.) (Need a note explaining the stats.)

The survey also asked if the teachers regularly made any special effort to personally improve their English language proficiencies. Out of 204 teachers, a little more than half of them (105 teachers) said they did. The types of efforts they made were as follows (note that the teachers were allowed to indicate multiple responses): (a) taking private English lessons (49 responses); (b) taking English lessons in groups (27); (c) reading papers and books in English regularly (18); (d) taking correspondence courses (16); (e) watching English TV regularly (14); (f) planning to study in an English-speaking country; (g) finding opportunities to talk to native speakers of English as much as possible (6); and (h) others (5). Those teachers who made special efforts to personally improve their English proficiency indicated that they spent on average 3.9 hours per week and 4.7% of their monthly income for improving their English proficiency.

#### Teachers' perceptions of proficiency-based competencies: competencies required to teach

Next, teachers were asked what kinds of competencies they were expected to have for teaching English at the elementary school level by students, parents and society (using a 5-point scale). The results are shown in Table 4. It is interesting to see that good pronunciation and oral language proficiency competencies were not necessarily judged by teachers as being the most important competencies to possess. What they perceived to be the most important was the instructional competency to teach oral communication, followed by a friendly personality. Teachers' personalities and their interpersonal skills have not been emphasized in adult-based EFL methodologies. However, we may surmise from results such as this that they may require more serious attention when it comes to young children's language acquisition, since such competencies seem to be closely related to students' motivation and to general classroom management. In addition to this, teachers perceived the use of technology (as yet another instructional competency) to likewise be relatively important. This last result reflects the growing role of technology

in EFL contexts. Parallel to the results of Q4 in Table 1 above, the majority of teachers thought that effectively using the students' first language (e.g., L1) was yet another relatively important competency.

Table 4  
Teachers' perceived "expected" competencies.

	Mean	Distribution (% of valid N)				
		1	2	3	4	5
Skills to teach oral communication	4.27	1.6%	0.5%	15.6%	33.9%	48.4%
Friendly personality	4.23	0%	4.7%	16.7%	29.7%	49.0%
Skills to use technology	4.06	1.6%	3.6%	18.8%	39.6%	36.5%
Skills to effectively use Korean in English instruction	4.03	2.1%	4.1%	21.8%	33.2%	38.9%
Good pronunciation	4.01	2.1%	4.2%	22.4%	33.3%	38.0%
Good oral proficiency	3.96	1.0%	7.3%	31.9%	34.6%	25.1%
Knowledge of target cultures and societies	3.81	1.6%	4.7%	27.9%	43.2%	22.6%
Skills to integrate English with other subject matters	3.80	4.2%	5.7%	25.0%	35.9%	29.2%
Knowledge of Korean and English languages	3.76	1.0%	10.9%	24.0%	39.1%	25.0%
Good reading/writing proficiencies	3.75	1.0%	7.3%	31.9%	34.6%	25.1%
Skills to teach reading/writing	3.68	1.0%	8.9%	31.9%	37.2%	20.9%
Skills to teach grammar	3.39	4.2%	14.6%	33.9%	32.8%	14.6%
To help students prepare for exams	3.16	10.4%	15.6%	35.4%	25.0%	13.5%

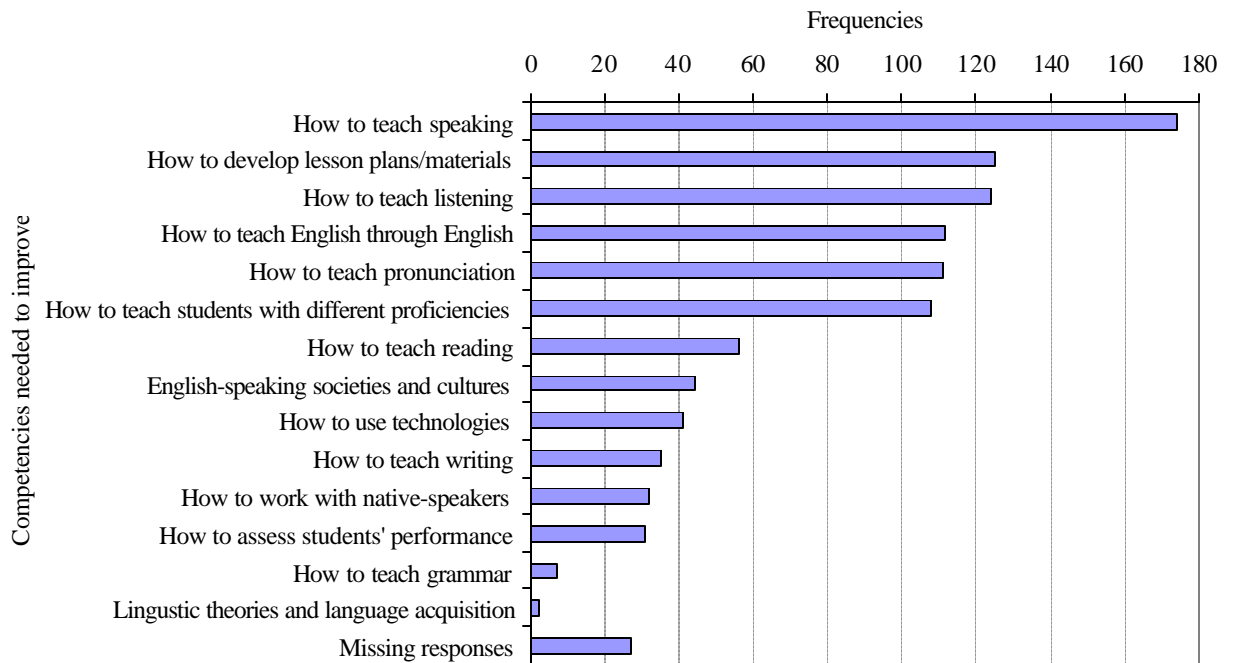
Note: 1 = It would be a nice quality to have, but I do not expect it; 2 = Slightly expected; 3 = Expected; 4 = Highly expected; 5 = Absolutely expected

#### Competencies that they wish to improve for effective teaching and their primary concerns regarding current practice

In order to better understand elementary school teachers' concerns towards English language education and their perceived needs for effective teaching, the survey included a question regarding what other types of training they wished to receive via in-service teacher training aside from basic proficiency training. The results obtained for this question are summarized below.

Consistent with the findings above, information related to the teaching of oral skills was most frequently requested. One can see from the data that the teachers themselves perceive a substantial need to improve their instructional competency when it comes to teaching oral skills. Other items which teachers strongly requested included (1) training in the development of lesson plans, materials and activities; (2) skills to teach English solely through the medium of English; and (3) skills needed for teaching students with different proficiencies. Response rates were low for competencies related to teaching reading, writing, and knowledge-based competencies such as knowledge of English-speaking societies and cultures and linguistics theories. Taking the analysis one step further, I explore below each of these concerns by incorporating data gathered from the interview portion of this study.

Figure 2



### (1) More guidance for developing effective activities in class

Setting “acquiring basic oral communicative skills” as a major goal, teachers’ main concerns have been to acquire and improve competencies to teach oral communicative skills. Teachers were widely encouraged to introduce song, chants, role-playing, games, and various other activities into their classrooms, all in the name of “oral communication.” This emphasis has been reflected by the Korean government’s general pedagogical philosophy as set forth in their latest curricula for students. These included more task-based and learner-centered approaches in language classrooms (Seoul Institutes of Teachers Education, 2002). Songs and chants are effective for helping students acquire the rhythm, intonation, and stress of the target language. These also help students store sentences and phrases in their memory in a naturalistic manner. Role-playing, games and various other activities are considered to be effective for providing students with more naturalistic and communicative environments for language learning. And most importantly, these are enjoyable activities and are presumed to help increase students’ motivation to learn the language. Such activities are widely employed in children’s language education, and Korea is no exception to this trend. The government’s approved textbook and its supplemental materials contain a number of such classroom activities. Teachers may also encounter such activities in their in-service teachers’ training as well. Yet, it does not always seem to be easy for teachers to effectively employ activities and games, as indicated by the statement our youngest interviewee (Ms. A):

We are encouraged to use songs and games in the class, and students have fun in those games. But I sometimes wonder how much English they actually learn from them. Also, English is fun only for the first two years (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders). After these two years, English is not fun anymore for many students. Games are not interesting for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders any more.

Concerns that were common to the teachers regarding such activities can be summarized as follows: first, teachers were concerned with how best to strike a balance between “learning English” and “having fun.” This balance should be varying according to the goals for each grade level, and teachers often find it difficult to grasp the appropriate balance. Such activity-based instruction had not been widely employed in formal school settings in Korea, and hence it poses a number of challenges for teachers as well as students. Second, students tend to release a lot of energy during these activities, and so naturally classroom management plays a crucial role. According to teachers, students often become over-excited in attempting to “win” the game at hand. Teachers also sometimes find it difficult to ensure that everybody participates in these activities equally, or to deal with social issues that may come up during the group activities but which originate outside of the English class. A third common concern is how best to keep students motivated. As the teacher above indicated, it is not easy to employ activities that are challenging enough to keep all of the students motivated. This is especially true for teachers who teach older students, as such students have frequently begun to exhibit substantial variation in their language proficiency, learning strategies, general cognitive development, and motivation to learn English.

It is also important to understand that communicative skills are acquired when people need to convey and negotiate meanings. Teachers were widely encouraged to introduce various activities into their classrooms, however, not all of the activities and games have communicative value (Anderson & Pesola, 1988). In English classes at the elementary school level, it is not unusual to have activities and games that have little communicative value and might in fact sound silly if conducted in the students' first language. For example, if a pair of students stood face to face and were asked to engage in a dialogue concerning “are you wearing a red shirt?” “Yes, I am,” this does not have any true communicative value by itself. It is obvious in the classroom context that by looking at the student being asked, the student asking this question can tell whether or not his peer was wearing a red shirt, and thus there may be no real need to ask the question in the first place. In this type of exercise, then, the students may merely be reciting what they were told to do. If the students cannot see each other, on the other hand, this dialogue would have communicative value and thus could be a motivating task (Anderson & Pesola, 1988). When choosing effective activities and games from textbooks and other sources, teachers need to make sure that such activities do indeed have communicative values and are cognitively challenging for the students. Teachers often need to revise the rules and format of the lesson in such cases in order to make sure that the activities and games are indeed meaningful and motivating for their students.

## (2) Skills to teach English solely through the medium of English

As we have seen above, even though many teachers did not agree with this instructional approach, the idea of teaching English through the medium of English has become a topic

of much concern among teachers. This might be because teachers believe that such an approach may be the future direction of language policy in Korea. A former English teacher at a junior high school who currently teaches English at elementary school (Ms. B) expressed her concerns toward this English-only approach as follows:

I don't think it's realistic to teach English through English only to our students. Many students in my class would not be able to understand what they are supposed to do in the class if I gave them instruction all in English. I don't see any point of doing this.

Another experienced regular classroom teacher (Ms. C) said:

I think mastering basic expressions for classroom English is not that hard for me, perhaps. But it sounds awfully hard to give instruction to students and manage the class all in English. What if students do not understand your instruction or what if they respond to you in Korean?

One can hear in these teachers' comments echoes of what has been documented in English-only classes for ESL (English as a Second Language) children in the U.S. In this latter case, numerous studies have reported the ineffectiveness of English-only instruction in ESL in the U.S. Auerbach (1993) for example, reviewed such studies among both children and adult ESL learners in the U.S. and concluded that "the rationale used to justify English only in the classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (p. 9). The rationale for employing English-only instruction in ESL is based on the assumption that the more English that learners can be exposed to, the better their chances of internalizing the language and facilitating their learning. This assumption has spread widely since the Reform Movement at the beginning of the past century (Howatt, 1984). This assumption still seems to be strongly supported in some EFL contexts wherein students have limited chances to receive and produce English and in which it is therefore believed that teachers should make every effort to provide students with as much exposure to the targeted language as possible. Part of this tenet might also be attributed to the excessive use of the Grammar-Translation Method in the past (Atkinson, 1987).

The art of teaching to students in English only requires certain proficiency competencies for non-native English-speaking teachers, and there is no guarantee that the elementary school teachers such as those who participated in this study may have such competencies. Moreover, teachers will be required to have sophisticated instructional competencies to offer classes through the medium of English only (including skills regarding how to assist students in English who seem to have difficulties in understanding instructions in English, as indicated by the teacher above). Furthermore, instruction through English only requires teachers to possess another layer of instructional competencies, namely, classroom management skills that must be exercised in what for them is typically a foreign language.

And, most importantly, the power to facilitate learning that the teachers have because of their ability to speak the students' L1 (in this case, Korean) is underestimated in English-only instruction. As we have seen earlier (Q4), many teachers in the present study have acknowledged the effective role of the students' first language (Korean) in

their English classes. Much of the research that has been done in ESL contexts has shown that the learners' L1 can be effectively used as powerful means to help students express and organize ideas that they might have difficulty with expressing directly in their target language (e.g., Piasecka, 1986).

The competencies that are required for teachers to conduct English instruction in English only are closely related to various student-related factors. Such factors include the students' ages, learning styles, proficiency levels, personality, and other socio-cultural and affective factors. For example, one may argue that English-only instruction will work better in lower grades than upper grades because while younger children may have an advantage in "enjoying and absorbing sounds and rhythms" in English-only classes, older children may come to be sensitive to "not understanding everything" in the class. The second teacher above (Ms. C) cited the role of peer pressure in her upper-grade English class. Some of her students were extremely sensitive about making mistakes in front of others and did not want their peers to find out that they did not understand the instruction being given. In sum, the Korean case illustrates both the extent to which there is variation even among elementary school students. Moving to a system based on English-only instruction would require that the teachers not only overcome the variations among students in order to meet their needs but also to do so in a language that is a foreign language both the teachers as well as the students.

### (3) Skills needed for teaching students with different proficiencies

Among the variations among students noted above, the differences in English language proficiencies were such that teachers have become very concerned about how to teach students with very different proficiency levels. Although the amount of time spent teaching English in the formal educational process at the elementary school level is not substantial (one or two hours per week), many elementary school students in Korea have begun taking English outside of school, and thus one can start to see wide ranges of proficiency among students. Although there are no formal statistics available, many teachers indicated that the number of students who are taking English lessons outside of school seems to have escalated since the formal introduction of English language education at the elementary school level. An anecdotal story indicates some of the implications of this trend: when the author asked a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student "What is your name?" during a lunch break, another student blurted out "It's no use talking to him in English. He cannot speak English." One can only imagine how such a labeling (when students are only beginning to learn English at the elementary school level) among children may affect learners, and indeed, a number of teachers expressed their concerns in this regard. It is important to note, however, that all three of the teachers interviewed by the author disagreed with the idea of placing students into different classes based on their proficiency levels. They all expressed their concern about the potentially negative effects such ranking may have on students who would then be placed in lower proficiency levels. According to the teachers, the wide differences in proficiency levels were found not only in the oral skill domain but also in the reading and writing domains. There is no doubt that teachers have to accommodate the different needs of students who exhibit wide ranges of proficiency levels, particularly in large classrooms.

### Conclusion

In light of the rapid changes in English language educational policy at the elementary school level in various East Asian countries, the present study attempted to identify elementary school teachers' concerns and needs for effective teaching in such EFL contexts in East Asia. This study focused on the case of Korea in order to understand such concerns and needs.

The survey results indicated that many teachers agreed with the introduction of English language education at the elementary school level, but they did not think it necessary to increase the amount of English lessons nor to teach other subjects in English.

As Murdoch (1994) has suggested, there is no doubt that it is important for non-native English teachers to improve their English proficiency. Korean teachers in the present study indicated that there were gaps in productive skill domains between their self-rated current proficiencies and the minimum levels of proficiencies that they saw as being necessary to teach at the elementary school level. A lack of teachers' productive proficiencies leads to lesser input for students. Large perceptual gaps on the part of teachers may also cause stress and may develop a sense of incompetence (Medgyes, 1994).

The proficiency levels that teachers think they need for teaching were at the intermediate level. However, the teachers participating in this study thought that they needed to have balanced proficiency across domains. They thought that similar levels of proficiencies were necessary for the reading/writing and in the oral domains for teachers, even if the curriculum strongly emphasized oral communication. Thus, it would be beneficial if in-service teacher training or other support mechanisms for teachers were designed to help them acquire (at the very least) an intermediate level of proficiency, both in the oral and the reading/writing domains. This should help ensure that teachers at the elementary school level would be confident enough to teach English.

Although it is important to have reasonable proficiency-based competencies, instructional-based competencies, especially for teaching oral skills, seemed to be the up-most concern among teachers. The difficulty of teaching oral skills to students seemed to be highlighted further with the introduction of innovative pedagogical approaches, such as learners-centered and activity-based approaches. Teachers not only needed to teach a new subject, but they also felt pressure to do so by employing pedagogical techniques that have been widely applied in English-speaking countries. Instructional approaches using the medium of English-only in an EFL context is a good example. English-only instruction does not mean that one can simply translate instructions that have been conducted in his/her first language into English. It often involves replacing culturally familiar teaching techniques with new techniques that are more common in the target cultures. Moreover, under English-only instruction, one of the greatest assets that teachers have, namely their knowledge of students' L1, goes unutilized. A transition to such a teaching style can be stressful for both teachers and students. We should investigate more systematically how to accommodate different instructional approaches in culturally effective ways and how best to use the students' L1 as an instructional tool in such approaches. Perhaps such information should also be incorporated in the in-service teacher training as well.

In the present study, we have only examined the Korean case wherein English is taught mainly by regular classroom teachers. In this case native English-speaking teachers have not yet been invited to participate in public elementary school classrooms. One can expect to see many common issues and concerns among other East Asian countries and regions wherein English is taught as a foreign language. However, one also has to expect that differences in concerns and expected competencies among teachers will emerge in different countries and in different contexts. In any case, teachers in the classroom should play a major role in the process of educational policy (Glisan, 1996), and their experiences and knowledge considered in order to create effective language education policy, and by so doing prepare the way for effective implementation. The results of the present study are preliminary findings. However, it is hoped that this study will serve to highlight the importance of teachers' voices in developing and implementing effective language education policies.

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## APPENDIX

Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix, FLOSEN (Padilla, Sung, & Aninao, 1997)

Note: One can check the middle levels (e.g., middle levels between Levels 1 and 2)

## Listening Comprehension

Levels	Description
Level 1	I can understand a limited number of high frequency words and common conversational set expressions such as "How are you?" or "My name is...."
Level 2	I can understand simple questions and statements in short dialogues or passages if it is repeated at slower-than-normal speed.
Level 3	I can understand the main point(s) of a short dialogue or passage if spoken at slower-than-normal speed. I may need some repetition.
Level 4	I can understand most of what is said (all main points and most details) at near normal speed.
Level 5	I can understand nearly everything at normal speed, although occasional repetition may be necessary.
Level 6	I can understand everything at normal speed like a native speaker.

## Oral Fluency

Level	Description
Level 1	I can speak using only short question-answer patterns such as "How are you" I am fine, thank you."
Level 2	I can participate in a simple conversation on familiar everyday topics at slower-than-normal speed. I must frequently pause during conversation.
Level 3	I can express myself using simple language, but make mistakes and pause a lot when I try to express complex ideas.
Level 4	I can effortlessly express myself at near normal speed. Occasionally, I have to slow down when expressing complex ideas and less-common expressions.
Level 5	I am generally fluent, but occasionally have minor pauses when I search for the correct manner of expression.
Level 6	I have native-like fluency.

## Vocabulary in Speech (Oral)

Level	Description
Level 1	I know a limited number of high frequency words and common conversational set expressions (e.g., "How are you? My name is..)
Level 2	I have enough vocabulary to make simple statements and ask questions in a simplified conversation.
Level 3	I have an adequate working vocabulary. I know some synonyms and can express simple ideas in a limited number of different ways.
Level 4	I have enough vocabulary to participate in everyday conversation and know many alternative ways of expressing simple ideas.
Level 5	I have enough vocabulary to participate in more extended discussions on various topics. I also know some connotations and nuances of certain words

	and expressions.
Level 6	I have an extensive native-like vocabulary.

Pronunciation

Level	Description
Level 1	I have difficulty in accurately producing the sounds and sounds patterns of English.
Level 2	I am beginning to master some sounds and sound patterns, but still have difficulty with some of the sounds.
Level 3	I can produce most of the sounds and sound patterns, but sometimes need to repeat myself to make the utterance more clear.
Level 4	My speech is always intelligible, but a definite accent and/or awkward intonation patterns are apparent.
Level 5	My pronunciation and intonation are near native-like.
Level 6	My pronunciation and intonation are exactly like those of a native speaker.

Grammar in Speech (Oral)

Level	Description
Level 1	I can only use common conversation set expressions.
Level 2	I can produce very basic sentence patterns but with frequent grammatical errors.
Level 3	I can produce a few complex sentence construction but with noticeable grammatical errors.
Level 4	I can speak using a good range of complex patterns and grammatical rules. However, occasional errors are still present.
Level 5	I have a good command over a large range of complex grammar and errors are infrequent.
Level 6	I can speak with a native-like command of complex grammatical patterns.

The following two matrices were developed by the author.

Reading Comprehension

Level	Description
Level 1	I can recognize a limited number of high frequency written words and understand English signs used on the street.
Level 2	I can understand simple directions and statements in short passages if they are written in simple sentences.
Level 3	I can understand the main point(s) of a short passage written in ordinary English if I can have some assistance such as consulting a dictionary and a grammar book, although there are usually some parts that remain unclear to me.
Level 4	I can read and understand most of what is written in regular English texts, although depending on the genre of the texts, I may encounter some unclear words and expressions and may need to consult a dictionary in order to comprehend the texts.
Level 5	I can read nearly everything with ease, although it is still a little slower for me

	to read in English than in my native language and occasionally I may encounter some unfamiliar words and expressions.
Level 6	I can read various kinds of English texts at a normal speed and with ease, just like I read in my native language.

### Writing English

Level	Description
Level 1	I can spell a limited number of high frequency words and common phrases.
Level 2	I can write a short paragraph using simple sentences with basic structures, but I frequently make mistakes in grammar and vocabulary.
Level 3	I can write letters and light essays using relatively simple language. I can produce a few complex sentence constructions but with noticeable mistakes in grammar and vocabulary. I usually take a long time to write when I try to express complex ideas.
Level 4	I have enough vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to write English with relative ease, however, I occasionally have some noticeable mistakes in grammar and vocabulary.
Level 5	I can write English almost like native speakers, but occasionally I may have minor unconventional uses of vocabulary and expressions.
Level 6	I can write English just like I do in my native language.