<Research Notes>

Issues concerning Immersion Education in Korean Schools in Japan

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ABSTRACT
This research note provides an overview of the Korean immersion education which has been conducted for more than half a century in Korean ethnic schools in Japan. First, Korean residents and their language use are briefly described and then an outline and features of Korean education as their heritage language are introduced. Finally some issues and perspectives regarding the matter are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Korean schools, Zainichi, Heritage language, Immersion
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1. “ZAINICHI” KOREAN RESIDENTS IN JAPAN AND THEIR LANGUAGE USE

More than two million foreigners currently reside in Japan. At the end of 2011, the number of Korean nationals was approximately 545,000, which is the second-biggest population after that of Chinese. Among these, 385,000 are Special Permanent Residents, so-called “old-timers” and their descendants (The Ministry of Justice, 2012).

For the second generation of Koreans in Japan and thereafter, Japanese is usually their first language and is also the home language in many cases. However, some families use Korean address terms for family members or relatives. In Korean communities in Japan, certain Korean words associated with ceremonial occasions often appear in Japanese conversation. There is also a “Zainichi Language” in which Korean residents speak on a daily basis in a mixture of Japanese and the dialects from the first generation of Koreans (mainly from the southern part of Korean Peninsula) (Kim, 2003a). It is also reported that on public occasions they tend to speak in their L2 Korean rather than their L1 Japanese (Kim, 2003b).

2. KOREAN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR KOREAN RESIDENTS IN JAPAN

2.1 Educational Facilities for Teaching Korean

The environments in which Korean children can learn their heritage language are roughly divided into three categories. First there are the “Ethnic Classes” which have been operated in some Japanese state schools (mainly in Osaka) for Korean children to learn their own history, culture and language for a couple of hours a week. There are also the “Korean Language Classes” such as summer or evening schools in Korean communities. Lastly there are the “Korean Ethnic Schools” established by Korean residents in Japan.

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2.2 Korean Schools in Japan

Immediately after the World War II approximately 2.4 million Koreans were in Japan, and 600,000 of them remained for a variety of reasons. According to a survey conducted by the Allied Powers’ General Headquarters, 80% of those remaining had hoped to return home. A “Language Training Centre” was founded just after the war in 1945 for children who were born in Japan to learn Korean language so that they would have no difficulty after their return. This was the predecessor of Korean Ethnic Schools (Pak, 2012). Today there are about 102 Korean schools across Japan. They follow the Japanese education system and consist of six-year elementary schools and three-year junior and senior high schools respectively (The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, 2012). Students number about 8,500, making this the largest case of heritage language education in Japan in terms of scale (Song, 2012).

The only requirement for admission to these schools is that either one of the parents has roots in Korea regardless of nationality. Most of the children enrolled are third- or fourth-generation Koreans in Japan. There is also a small number of native Korean-speaking students, so-called “newcomers,” who have recently come from South Korea or China.

Korea University in Tokyo is their highest-level educational institute, in effect playing the role of a teacher-training institution for Korean schools in Japan. Basically, teachers at elementary schools are Japanese-Korean bilinguals graduated from the Faculty of Education. This unique teacher-training cycle, is a great feature and also one of the factors that have enabled heritage language education at Korean schools (Ryu, 2009).

2.3 Language Education in Korean Schools

All Korean schools across Japan use common textbooks¹ and supplementary materials originally edited for them. Textbooks reflect their orientation of being permanent residents in Japan and include contents for students to learn about Japan and international societies. The textbooks used in Japanese state schools are referenced respectively. Textbook reform has been carried out several times in order to adapt to the change of times (The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, 2012).

Early-adoption-total-immersion education in Korean has been conducted from elementary to high school, except for Japanese and English classes. About 24 percent of the total number of classes in elementary and junior high schools are comprised of Korean language classes. Japanese and English are also taught as subjects in the regular curriculum (Urihakkyo on the Web; The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, 2012).

A close examination of the six-year elementary curriculum reveals that, more than 200 hours are devoted to Korean lessons annually. The curriculum particularly stresses the importance of intensive L2 Korean lessons as their heritage language in elementary school students’ first and second years by providing 306 hours and 280 hours of lessons respectively. This meets Netten and Germaine’s stated requirements for intensive in/output in successful language learning (Netten & Germain, 2005).

Previous study² revealed that a great emphasis on improving children’s speaking skill is placed at first using practical textbooks suitable for their daily life, and systematic introduction of Korean orthography is gradually introduced. Also, the teacher conducts “focus on form” instruction supported by Japanese, which is the children’s first language. Daily routine activities and casual conversation during breaks between classes give children opportunities for output in Korean. Within a year, children come to be able to understand almost 100% of the teacher’s instructions in Korean and can also

¹ The Textbook Editorial Committee was established in February 1946.
² This article is based on author’s research conducted in 2008 through the participant observation of a Korean school in Kyoto.
3. STUDENTS’ KOREAN LANGUAGE SKILLS: ISSUES AND TASKS THAT LIE AHEAD

Although the children appear fluent in Korean, there are some problems in their language skills. Apparently they only have a limited number of Korean words and expressions compared to their L1 Japanese, and as a result there is a gap between productive capacity in Korean and Japanese (Ryu, 2009). This results from the fact that they have limited Korean input, and only on school premises. It is also noted that their Korean grammar and pronunciation are not free from the interference of Japanese and have unique, slightly different intonation and vocabulary to that used by native speakers. Some researchers see this unbalanced language function as problematic and call it “lexical imbalance” and such children “school-type bilinguals” (Pak, 2010).

Nevertheless, their Korean is sufficiently functional and should be regarded as one variant of Korean (Ueda, 2001). However, it is often regarded as a language disorder by some teachers and graduates of Korean schools. This could be a sign of their lack of confidence as non-native speakers. Since we recently have easy access to “authentic” Korean spoken by native speakers through media, the difference between the two is highlighted more than ever.

To overcome this problem, textbooks used in Korean classes, which had been centred on written language, were reedited in 2003 to enhance students’ oral skills. They now mainly consist of practical dialogues and conversations (Pak, 2012).

Korean school teachers across Japan gather for an education and research conference every year to exchange their ideas and have discussions. Several conference reports have pointed out the importance of improving teachers’ capacity in Korean (Kim, 1997). They also report action researches into including parents in Korean language education and overcoming problems in the L2 acquisition process caused by limited Korean input (Kim, 2003).

Pedagogical details of language education in Korean schools have so far not been revealed to the outside world. The above mentioned practice reports have been shared only within Korean school networks and not been theorized upon. The methods and criteria to properly evaluate the level of students’ L2 Korean are not yet well developed.

The key point in improving Korean immersion education would be raising teachers’ L2 Korean proficiency. They also need to establish a method of evaluating the level of students’ L2 Korean. It is imperative that Korean schools theorize and systematize educational practice and teaching methods that they have accumulated so far by referring to the knowledge that has been revealed in the second language acquisition study or other immersion programs such as French immersion in Canada.

4. CONCLUSION

So far I have presented an overview of Korean schools in Japan and the issues involved in their language education. They have been practicing heritage language-immersion education for a long time and as a result have produced many Japanese-Korean bilinguals. It should be emphasized that it is a rare example globally in that the education system has its own teacher-training cycle. As Japanese society becomes increasingly multilingualized, it is likely that the importance of the Korean schools as a place of language-education practice will be recognized more than ever.

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3 The large-scale questionnaire survey and interviews administrated from November 2006 to December 2008 for 902 Korean residents (teachers, students and graduates of Korean schools) in Japan.
In many countries with immigrants, school-age children move across national borders for a variety of reasons. Their language and scholastic problems are an urgent issue to be addressed. The knowledge and experience that Korean schools have accumulated over fifty years may suggest to them a model for heritage language education for minority-language children. This diversity will become a language resource for the country. When these students are able to keep their heritage language as well as majority language, they become a great human resource, playing large roles in promoting international cooperation and understanding (Cummins & Danesi, 2005: 98).

Most students studying at Korean schools are born and raised in Japan and can be called hybrid people who internalize both countries’ languages and cultures. With the recent Korean pop-culture boom, the so-called “Korean Wave” (JETRO, 2011 pp. 1-11.), many bilingual graduates from Korean schools have been playing active parts in a wide range of Korea-related business and trade. They are now expected to play increasingly important roles in bridging two countries with their bilingual and bicultural knowledge. They will be able to inspire our society as “resources for social reform” through their presence and voices (Ochiai, 2012: 219). Thus, it is necessary for us to recognize the value of having foreign schools in Japan such as Korean schools which contribute to social innovation for our multicultural society.

5. REFERENCES


