

# Preparations for Practicing Effective English Immersion Program in Korea

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## I. Introduction

A solid curriculum is imperative for young language learners. English was selected as a regular elementary school subject in Korea in 1997, and today, public interest in and expectations for a solid young-learner curriculum have never been higher. To fulfill these expectations, Ministry of education in Korea is preparing to introduce an English immersion program. The goal is to develop learners' interest and confidence in English so that learners may approach English naturally. The immersion program is a content-based curriculum that uses the target language not as a subject, but rather as the medium for content delivery. If the program is successful, learners will acquire the target language in much the same way that they acquired their native language. It will encourage learners to immerse themselves in content written in the target language, so that they not only achieve the learning objectives of each subject, but also acquire remarkably high proficiency in the target language through a natural approach. Learners will expand their English communicative skills in all areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and critical thinking.

The immersion program has proven to be 'the most successful language teaching program ever recorded in the professional language teaching literature' (Krashen, 1985). However, in order to be effective in the EFL environment of Korea, an immersion program will require some special preparations. To achieve effective results from the English Immersion Program (EIP) in Korea, it should be carefully designed, considering three aspects: preparation for content-based instruction, task-based instruction through learner-centered activities, and student-teacher interaction and correction.

## II. Pedagogy Approach to English Immersion Program in Korea

### 1. Preparations for Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

Under the Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1985), learners will acquire an L2 when they have access to comprehensible input. Comprehensible input, according to Krashen, becomes most valuable when the new level ( $i+1$ ) is just beyond the learner's current level ( $i$ ). In an EFL environment, in many cases, learners find themselves trying to understand content that is far higher than their current level  $i$ , and thus they encounter a barrier to acquiring  $i+1$ . To address this barrier, an early-immersion program in Hungary provides a curriculum called 'zeroyear' for students unable to access comprehensible input. Indeed, late-immersion programs, where students may encounter more barriers to  $i+1$  than would early-immersion learners, provide L2 learners with form-focused EFL classes, or with both EFL classes and L2 immersion courses concurrently. Such 'zeroyear' and late-immersion program imply that content-based instruction is not appropriate for L2 learners whose current levels are below  $i$ .

It leads to the idea that the successful contents of a ‘zeroyear’ curriculum, with the intention of achieving level *i*, will have a crucial role in EIP. Preparing L2 learners to meet comprehensible input is the key to establishing EIP successfully in Korea. Preparation should include the following: listening and speaking skills, high-frequency vocabulary, and reading and writing skills, all focusing on the divergence between English and Korean, using form-focused instruction.

### **1) Listening and Speaking Skills**

The first step in preparation is phonics, which trains beginners to associate letters with their sound values. Although L2 learners acquire phoneme awareness through their native language, not all are able to recognize the association between sounds and letters in speaking or listening to a foreign language. Learners of English as a native language have sufficient exposure to the sounds of English without the need for formal focus on sound input. However, L2 learners of English have limited exposure to those sounds, and thus lack the ability to distinguish sound values, or phonemes, in English. Therefore, phonics for L2 learners should focus not only on associating letters with sound values, but should offer sufficient exposure to English from the beginning to acquire those sound values.

In learning phonics, the following information facilitates L2 learners in recognizing sounds and pronouncing English correctly: the position of the tongue, the distinction between voiced and unvoiced sounds, the flow of air, and the visualization of a native speaker’s mouth. As L2 learners acquire phonics, they must learn the concepts of the syllable and intonation. However, the intonation of Korean much differs from that of English, making English particularly difficult for L2 learners in Korea. The intonation of reduced speech forms in English can pose a particular challenge. These forms carry such features as stressed and unstressed vowels, omitted sounds, function words, content words, contraction, and blending. In general communication, a sentence is formed by function and content words. If there are more than two content words in a sentence, the variation in sound becomes more dynamic. L2 learners should comprehend these concepts as well as practice them in order to interact with their peers in the immersion program.

### **2) Vocabulary**

If English becomes the medium for content-based instruction, L2 learners should be equipped with sufficient vocabulary to comprehend the contents. Theorists differ on what constitutes sufficient vocabulary for successful content-based instruction in EIP. “To read minimal disturbance from unknown vocabulary, language users probably need a vocabulary of 15,000 to 20,000 words” (Nation 2001). Yet, according to text-coverage data (Carol, Davies, and Richman 1971), 2,000 high-frequency words will equip learners to cover 81.3 percent of a text, whereas 12,448 words will allow them to cover 95 percent. Although L2 learners can acquire these words through exposure in an immersion program, learning 2,000 high-frequency words even before they begin the program may facilitate their vocabulary acquisition during the program. Moreover, considering that words in English frequently carry inflections and derivatives, awareness of word families will help L2 learners to acquire lower-frequency, academic vocabulary more rapidly. A word family consists of a root word along with its inflected forms and its derivative forms. By learning word families, L2 learners will expand the size of their vocabularies while also improving their pronunciation as well as their facility for changing parts of speech and choosing appropriate vocabulary to convey

their intended meanings.

### 3) Reading and Writing Skills

Under content-based instruction, reading and writing skills are crucial to comprehending course contents, and to demonstrating that comprehension. However, due to the different historical-linguistic origins of Korean and English (Korean is part of the Uralic family, whereas English has its roots in the Indo-European), Korean L2 learners of English often find difficulty understanding English grammar. Studies from immersion classes (Swain 1995) have shown that mere exposure to language is insufficient for the development of grammatical accuracy. Hence, L2 learners in Korea need to understand these grammatical differences before English can become the medium for content delivery.

In English, the verb forms the basis of a sentence, dividing the sentence into two parts: the subject or head before the verb and the predicate or complement after the verb. In Korean, the verb is at the end of a sentence, placing greater emphasis on the subject and object as content words. Such distinction makes it difficult for L2 learners to find a verb in English, with consequent difficulty locating a sentence subject, especially if that subject is a clause containing a verbal expression. Furthermore, in English, the parts of speech, or the functions of words, in a sentence are not only determined by the forms of the words, but just as importantly, by their positions in the sentence. In Korean, the parts of speech are identified through postposition particles, so that a word's position is not as crucial to determining its function. In other words, the subject is not always required to be before the verb, but may occur anywhere in a sentence. This difference may lead to confusion when Korean L2 learners read and write in English. In the following sentences, with postposition particles that make 'mom' the subject (SPW), 'mom' can be placed anywhere in a Korean sentence, while still functioning as a subject.

- 1.a *na-nun (SPW) saranghabnida ummam-rul.* (○)
- 1.b I loves mom. (○)
- 2.a *umma-rul saranghabnida na-nun(SPW).* (○)
- 2.b Mom loves I. (x)
- 3.a *na-nun (SPW) ummam-rul saranghabnida.* (○)
- 3.b I mom loves. (x)

The word 'nun' in Korean functions as a subject postposition particle. The sentences above have the same meaning in Korean, where in English only sentence 1.b is grammatically correct. Thus, unless they understand the position of a subject in English, L2 learners may encounter difficulty deciding where to place 'mom' in an English sentence.

First, L2 learners need to know which postposition particles in Korean determine each part of speech. Second, they need to know that which places in an English sentence each part of speech may take. Third, upon their knowledge of parts of speech in both Korean and English, they need to practice forms and syntax through sequential and cumulative task-based instruction. It is imperative to comprehend the differences in grammar to attain comprehensible input in content-based instruction.

## **2. Task-based Instruction through Learner-centered Activities**

All three types of preparation are both form-focused and meaning-focused instruction: listening and speaking skills, vocabulary, reading and writing skills. However, understanding these skills is not enough for L2 learners to apply them in communication. Considering the differences between Korean and English, L2 learners also need practice through task-based instruction. Selected authentic and sequential materials should be provided as the basis for tasks that help L2 learners obtain comprehensible input. Task-based instruction should support a learner-centered environment so that L2 learners have as many opportunities as possible to produce the language through speaking and writing, as well as to respond to language received through reading and listening.

## **3. Interactions and Corrections with teacher.**

The primary role of teachers is not to “teach” learners in the traditional, pedantic sense, but to observe learner progress and guide them toward independent language production through interaction in a learner-centered environment. Throughout this interaction, the teacher should elicit comprehensible output, which then leads learners toward higher comprehensible input. The question is, however, who should be the teachers to correct the L2 errors: L2 native speakers or Korean English teachers? In preparation courses, native speakers may not be as helpful as Korean English teachers. An L2 learner’s output is based on their comprehensible input. If they make errors while interacting with a teacher, a teacher will give them focused-input on error, but it should be comprehensible. During preparation courses, it may be difficult for L2 learners and native speakers to communicate with each other in English due to the learners’ insufficient level of comprehensible input.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

Although many are still debating its effectiveness, EIP is a step away from taking its place in Korea. It may be a new era for EFL instruction in Korea. The immersion program is content-based instruction where L2 learners use only English as the instructional medium. However, comprehending content-based instruction is not possible without at least a minimum knowledge of English. Through preparation courses, L2 learners will first learn acquire the listening and speaking skills, vocabulary, and speaking and writing skills they need to attain a higher level of comprehensible input and output. Meanwhile, Korean teachers may interact with them and correct their errors in a way that L2 learners can follow. The implementation of EIP in Korea may be inevitable, yet before such implementation can take place, adjustments must be made so that the curriculum is appropriate for L2 learners in Korea.

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**About the Speaker**

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