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English Activity Programs in Libraries: Exploring the Potential of Children's English Libraries as a Countermeasure for Educational Gaps

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Abstract: The Korean government has implemented various measures to address the disparity in English language proficiency stemming from income inequality. One such initiative is children's English libraries. These libraries in Korea not only provide English-language books but also offer camps and English-language programs either for free or at low cost. In Japan, educational disparity has emerged as a significant issue in recent years, particularly regarding English education at the elementary school level, which has only recently been introduced as a school subject and appears to be exacerbating the gap. To investigate the feasibility of establishing children's English libraries similar to those in Korea, this study conducted regular English-language activities at libraries akin to those in Korea in 2022 and 2023, and surveys were conducted among the children and their guardians.

Keywords: Library, Children's english libraries, Countermeasure for educational gaps, English activity

Introduction

The South Korean government has implemented various measures to eliminate the disparity in English proficiency arising from income inequality. One such initiative is children's English libraries, which not only provide English books but also offer camps and English programs for free or at a low cost. In Japan, educational disparity has emerged as a significant issue in recent years, particularly regarding English education at the elementary school level, which has only recently been introduced as a school subject and appears to be exacerbating the gap. Thus, this study explores the possibility of establishing English libraries akin to those in South Korea by conducting regular English activities in libraries. Specifically, this research focuses on developing, and practicing programs based on CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), which involves learning content from other subjects through English.

Children's English Libraries in South Korea

Several studies in South Korea have been conducted on children's English libraries since 2009. For instance, Chang (2011) surveyed the operation of English reading programs at public children's libraries nationwide,

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finding that 60% of them ran such programs, primarily targeting children under seven years old and younger elementary students, with storytelling activities being the most common. The survey also noted that while various types of programs, such as age-specific ones and experiential programs like fairy tale plays, were being run, most libraries lacked proper standards in terms of objectives, instructors, content, and levels of English reading programs. Chang further conducted a questionnaire survey among children and guardians participating in the library programs, revealing that many guardians recognized the importance of English reading programs, though satisfaction levels were not very high, and many felt the need for more diverse and numerous programs.

Lee (2015) surveyed children's English libraries in Busan and Seoul and found that they were typically located in economically affluent areas of new towns and new urban districts. The libraries were suggested to be staffed with professional personnel capable of English instruction, such as librarians, native English-speaking teachers, and Korean teachers with an English education background, and also to include resources like DVDs, audio materials, and board games. Ham and Kim (2010) proposed using libraries as one strategy to improve the English education environment in rural areas, suggesting that renovating existing public libraries into English-only spaces could help reduce costs and focus resources on running programs, thus providing high-quality education aligned with public education and offering rural residents educational opportunities comparable to those in cities, potentially at a lower cost than English villages.

Busan English Library

This section introduces the Busan English Library, which is reputed to be one of the largest English libraries in South Korea. The Busan English Library was opened on July 1, 2009, within the same premises as the Busan Global Village, and on May 30, 2013, the Busan English e-Library was inaugurated. Membership is free and open only to residents of Busan, allowing them to borrow books and participate in programs at no cost.

English Resource Room

The shelves are organized by Lexile measure, a reading standard index developed by Metamatrix, color-coded for different levels:

- Green Corner Children (Green: 32 seats) for elementary-level books from Lexile 100 to 400.
- Blue Corner Juniors (Blue: 30 seats) for middle and high school level books from Lexile 500 to 800.
- Orange Corner Adults (Orange: 30 seats) for books over Lexile 900 used by college students, English majors, and teachers.

World for Kids

This children's area includes three rooms:

- Read to Me: A room for preschool children to read with their parents, featuring about 2,000 picture books at the BR (Beginning Reading) Lexile level.
- Magic Club: A room for fun reading sessions in English.
- Story Club: A room for ongoing programs.

English Resource Room

Books in the English Resource Room are also organized by Lexile measure according to reading difficulty:

- Green Corner Children (Green: 32 seats) contains books for elementary levels from Lexile 100 to 400.
- Blue Corner Juniors (Blue: 30 seats) includes books for middle and high school levels from Lexile 500 to 800.
- Orange Corner Adults (Orange: 30 seats) houses advanced books over Lexile 900 suitable for college students and English educators.

English Reading Diagnostics

A unique feature of the Busan English Library is the incorporation of the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and Scholastic Reading Counts (SRC) for English reading diagnostics:

- SRI: A computer program that recommends books based on the user's Lexile measure.
- SRC: A post-reading quiz program with about 10 questions that helps gauge comprehension of the book read.

Tests are available daily, and those interested can apply via the library's website.

English Programs

All English programs are free and available on a first-come, first-served basis; some programs may reach capacity soon after registration opens.

Permanent English Educational Programs

Programs for families (targeting preschool children & 1st and 2nd graders):

- Read & Create with Family I: For parents and children (6-7 years old) - Reading English picture books and engaging in creative activities.
- Read & Sing with Family I: For parents and children (6-7 years old) - Reading English fairy tales at a 100L level and singing along.
- Read & Create with Family II: Reading English fairy tales between 100L-200L levels and conducting creative activities.
- Read & Sing with Family II: For parents and 1st and 2nd graders - Reading and singing activities based on English fairy tales from 100L-200L.
- Reading with Family I: For parents and children (6-7 years old) - Reading English stories and engaging in related activities.
- Reading with Family II: For parents and 1st and 2nd graders - Reading English stories and engaging in related activities.
- Kids Animation: For parents and children (6-7 years old, 1st and 2nd graders) - Screening educational animations.

Programs for 3rd and 4th Graders

- Reading Starter I: Reading books at a 200L level and expressing personal thoughts.
- Reading Starter II: Reading books from 200L to 300L and sharing personal insights.
- Step-up Reading I: Collaboratively reading books from 300L to 400L and discussing them.
- Step-up Reading II: Reading books from 400L to 500L and engaging in various post-reading activities.
- Media Magic: Using various media (films, animations, video clips, music) to learn English expressions and related activities.
- Topic Activity (Advanced): Reading books on various topics and engaging in related activities post-reading.

Programs for 5th and 6th Graders

- Step-up Reading II (Advanced): A program aiming to encourage independent reading through engagement with books from 400L to 500L and diverse reading activities.
- ENIE (Weekdays): Learning English through editorials in English newspapers.
- Intensive Reading: Targeted at children who can start reading in English independently, involving reading chapter books and engaging in various reading activities.
- Topic Discussion: Conducting group discussions on various topics.
- ENIE (Weekends): Reading English newspapers with a native English-speaking teacher and receiving personalized feedback on writing short essays.

Special Reading Promotion Program: Reading Star

Reading Star is a self-directed English reading enhancement program where participants take the SRI test, read books suited to their level, take the SRC quiz to measure improvement, and write reading reports in English to be reviewed by native speakers.

- Period: Annually from April to October (7 months)
- Eligibility: Approximately 120 students from elementary to high school in Busan city.

Use of Volunteers

The Busan English Library actively incorporates volunteers through the following programs:

- Reading Buddy: A weekly activity where elementary students (mentees) and middle/high school students (mentors) read English fairy tales together to develop proper reading habits and build confidence and interest in English.
- Fun Reading with Volunteers: A daily program from Monday to Friday where volunteer members (adults) read English books to children and 1st and 2nd graders.

The Aim of Study

The purpose of this study is to implement English programs for children in Japanese libraries and to explore the possibility of establishing facilities in Japan similar to the children's English libraries found in South Korea.

Method

In the fiscal year 2022, the program was conducted three times, and in the fiscal year 2023, it was held five times, totaling eight sessions in libraries. The participants were preschool and elementary school children, taught English by university students volunteering. Additionally, to evaluate the program, open-ended surveys were administered to the participating children and their guardians.

Results and Discussion

2022 Library Activities

Initially, the plan was to implement this program as part of the library's activities with the cooperation of the libraries. We sought to collaborate with libraries in the suburbs of Tokyo, such as those in Kokubunji City and Nerima Ward, to implement our English program. However, we were refused permission to conduct the program in these libraries for reasons including "Only storytelling is allowed in libraries" and "Libraries are not educational facilities and therefore cannot host programs with a strong educational component." Consequently, we decided to rent a seminar room at a library, "Musashino Place" in Musashino City for a fee to carry out the program.

However, as there were no residents of Musashino City among us, we were not permitted to advertise in the Musashino City newsletter or distribute flyers in community centers and public halls, which made it difficult to recruit children. The program was originally scheduled to be held four times, but it was canceled when only one child registered for the third session. Therefore, the last session was moved to the Kinuta Library in Setagaya Ward, where one of the members is a resident and facilitated the events.

Session 1: Let's Play in English! Art Class "Drawing with Vegetable Stamps"

Date and Time: October 30, 2022, 14:00 - 15:00

Location: Musashino Place, Room C

Participants: 1 preschool child, 10 elementary school students

Volunteers: 6 university students

First, we conducted a CLIL art project, where participants created artwork using vegetable stamps. We then started with a storytelling session on the picture book "*It Looked Like Split Milk*", followed by learning how to say different vegetables, colors, and shapes in English. The children then freely created their artwork.

The following is the schedule for the day.

14:00~14:05 Self-introductions.

14:05~14:15 Storytime with the picture book.

14:15~14:30 Explanation of vegetable stamping.

14:30~14:50 Create freely. Add titles to the artwork.

14:50~15:00 Share titles and show each other's artwork.

Children's Reactions

Initially, the children appeared nervous, but they relaxed after making origami with the students before the program started. Each group, assisted by a student, conversed in both English and Japanese while working on their projects. The older children quickly became enthusiastic and, after completing one piece, moved on to create a second one, drawing their favorite animals, the sky, trees, and more. The younger children and the preschool child, who did not understand the concept of using sliced vegetables as stamps, ended up using the vegetables like paintbrushes but were imaginative in their drawings, nonetheless.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- I was glad to learn the English names for vegetables.
- I want to teach them to my friends, too.
- It was fun using various vegetables.
- I did well. I want to like vegetables even more now.
- At first, I was just doing it somehow, but gradually I understood what I was making and created my artwork.
- I was surprised that everyone was speaking English and I learned about various vegetables and fruits, so I want to learn more here. It was fun.
- There were various vegetables. I learned the names of vegetables like edamame and spinach in English. Vegetable stamping was also fun.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- We were provided with a lot of interesting materials related to vegetables, allowing us to experience something we don't usually do.
- Thank you for letting us participate in such an enjoyable event. I believe that starting from art class will also increase their interest in English.
- It was an interesting activity with many different vegetables provided as tools, allowing the children to experience something they normally don't get to do.
- Thank you for letting us participate in such an interesting event. Starting with art helped to increase their interest in English.

Session 2: Let's Play in English! English × Physical Education "Using Our Brains and Bodies" - Why not experience soccer in English, pretending to be your favorite player?

Date: November 27, 2022, 14:00 - 15:00

Location: Musashino Place, Room C

Participants: 6 elementary school students

Participating Students: 7 university students

In the second session, we conducted a CLIL session focused on physical education. Specifically, we used soccer as the theme and conducted activities such as learning numbers, colors, and sports names, followed by creating self-introductions and practice menus.

The following is the schedule for the day.

14:00~14:08 Greetings. Introductions of teachers and students.

14:08~14:38 Confirmation of alphabet, numbers 1-10, colors & sports names.

14:38~14:58 Let's create a practice menu!

14:58~15:00 Greetings

Children's Reactions

The children seemed to enjoy the activities involving soccer balls, but as it was the first experience for the university students who participated as volunteers, there were moments when the proceedings did not go smoothly.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- It was good to be able to touch the soccer ball and watch videos.
- The teacher's English was difficult to understand, but the shots in the soccer videos looked cool.
- It was fun and easy to understand.

Guardian's Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- This was their first time attending an English class and they seemed to have fun. It was very timely to have this theme during the Soccer World Cup excitement. The teacher's gentle English was easy to listen to. Thank you.
- It was great to see them interested in watching soccer videos for self-introductions and quizzes, as they like soccer.
- It was good to be able to interact with English in a fun atmosphere. They seemed to have a good time doing quizzes on the videos and everyone enjoyed themselves. They were happy to be able to introduce themselves too. It was a fulfilling and fun experience. Thank you.
- It was good to see them willing to learn unexpected vocabulary and actions. I think it was great to have participated in such an English learning environment. Thank you.

Session 3: Let's Play in English! Paper Plane Competition: Make and Play with Paper Airplanes with University Students

Date: February 18, 2023, 13:30 - 14:30

Location: Setagaya District Kinuta Library Meeting Room

Participants: 1 preschool child, 7 elementary school students

Participating Students: 7 university students

The third session involved an activity of making paper airplanes in English. We began with a storytelling session reading "*Little Cloud*", followed by a slideshow presentation on making paper airplanes. Then, while watching the slideshow, we made paper airplanes in English. Finally, we flew the completed paper airplanes and measured flight distance and altitude.

The following is the schedule for the day.

13:30~13:45 Greetings, Storytime (Reading "*Little Cloud*"), Slideshow of Paper Airplane Making

13:45~14:00 Make paper airplanes in English while watching the slideshow.

14:00~14:10 Fly the completed paper airplanes, and measure flight distance and altitude.

14:10~14:15 Participants present their flight distance and altitude.

14:15~14:25 Divide into groups and make large paper airplanes.

14:25~14:30 Fly the completed paper airplanes, award medals to participants, and dismiss.

Children's Reactions

Many participants were proficient in English and responded well to communication in English. Half of the participants were 1st graders who enjoyed folding and flying paper planes while listening to English, each showing their unique enjoyment. The other group (2nd to 5th graders) was very calm, attentively following the English slides while making their paper airplanes. Notably, the older group (2nd to 5th graders) cooperated by calling out to each other, unfortunately not in English, while folding and flying larger paper planes in the latter part. When announcing the flight distances and altitudes, following the students' presentations, every participant was able to announce loudly in English. Overall, it seemed that they were enjoying themselves in various ways appropriate to their ages.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- I had fun. Thank you.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- I could see my child thoroughly enjoying making paper airplanes and testing how far they could fly, which also brought discoveries for us. It was reassuring that the university students, both young men and women, kindly interacted with the children, allowing them to participate comfortably.

Discussion of Fiscal Year 2022

As mentioned above, we had struggled to find a library where we could implement the program, and we were unable to secure cooperation from Musashino City in recruiting children. Various difficulties arose before implementation. Based on the experience of the fiscal year 2022, it can be said that conducting English activity programs like those in English libraries in Korea at public libraries is quite challenging.

However, feedback from the children (e.g., 'I was surprised that everyone was speaking English and I learned about various vegetables and fruits, so I want to learn more here. It was fun.') and guardians (e.g., 'It was good to be able to interact with English in a fun atmosphere.' 'I think it was great to have participated in such an English learning environment. ') indicates satisfaction with and enjoyment of such English activities.

2023 Library Activities

In 2023, practices were conducted at four libraries: Shirayuri University Library, Fukaya City Library, Biei Town Library, and Kodaira City Central Library.

Session1: Le's Make a Panel Theater and Read a Story in English

Date: June 24, 2023, 13:00 - 15:00

Location: Third floor of Shirayuri University Library

Participants: 10 elementary school students

Volunteers: 5 university students

We conducted an activity where we made a panel theater based on the picture book "Guri and Gura".

The following is the schedule for the day.

13:00-13:05 Greetings.

13:05-13:15 What's in the box?

13:15-13:25 Introduction to the picture book "Guri and Gura".

13:25-13:40 Practice singing.

13:40-13:50 Brainstorming egg dishes.

13:50-14:10 Creating a panel theater.

14:35-14:45 Break time / Editing time.

14:45-14:55 Presentation viewing.

14:55-15:00 Conducting surveys

Children's Reactions

Initially, the children were nervous, but as they started playing the "What's in the box?" game, they gradually began to speak more and consulted with each other, guessing "Ah! Maybe it's that!". In the activity where they thought about dishes using eggs, we had already anticipated what kind of egg dishes the children might think of, so on the day, it was easy to decide on the ingredients and utensils to use. As a result of discussions with the children, they decided to make omurice (rice omelet) and doughnuts, which were then created as panels. The omurice covered in ketchup and placed on a plate was depicted as very appetizing. After completing the panels, the groups practiced parts of the picture book's narration and recorded it. They rehearsed once before the final recording, which was then filmed. In the end, everyone watched the presentations together.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- It was fun.
- I had fun making tools from "Guri and Gura" and singing with everyone.
- I learned a lot of English. It was fun.
- The "Guri and Gura" panel theater was fun.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- At first, some children were shy, but I was amazed to see how quickly they started to enjoy themselves and became friendly with each other, and how they became more comfortable with English. It was wonderful to see the teachers always being fun and kind, turning the children into smiling and proactive participants in such a short time. Thank you. They also seemed to enjoy painting and drawing.
- My child seemed to have a lot of fun and it was a good experience. Initially hesitant about not understanding English, they became engrossed and enjoyed themselves while painting and memorizing lines.
- I was worried that things might not go smoothly because children can be unpredictable and I feared they might cause trouble, but there was time for them to do things they enjoy like drawing and singing, and thanks to good support, everything turned out well. I was relieved to see them participating happily. Thank you.

- I was happy to see my child taking initiative. It was their first time with English, but they seemed to enjoy it.

Session 2: Why not experience soccer in English, pretending to be your favorite player?

Date: July 29, 2023, 14:00 - 15:30

Location: Fukaya City Library 3F Exhibition Room

Participants: 11 pre-school children, 5 elementary students

Volunteers: 8 university students

The second session focused on CLIL with the theme of soccer.

The following is the schedule for the day.

14:00-14:10 Greetings.

14:10-14:35 Quiz/Game.

14:35-15:10 Let's introduce ourselves.

15:10-15:20 Storytime.

15:20-15:30 Conducting surveys.

Children's Reactions

During the session, the children gradually got to know each other as they introduced themselves while passing a soccer ball around with the university students. They particularly enjoyed the experience of touching the soccer ball. However, due to the presence of many preschool children, there was some confusion and a need for adaptable instruction to cater to the children's levels.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- I understood the English.
- The guessing game was fun.
- It was fun.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- Learning English while playing is, I think, the best way for children to enjoy and learn. The students were very enthusiastic and active in their assistance. So cute!! I hope this becomes a regular event.
- It was great to see my son actively having fun. I would like to bring his younger brother next time.
- At first, he seemed overwhelmed by the atmosphere, but he enjoyed participating through greetings and games, which was impressive. The teachers did a great job of encouraging everyone. I would like to participate again if there is another opportunity.
- I don't speak English myself, so I also enjoyed this kind of class.
- I was pleased to see my child seriously participating in various activities on their own. It was a different learning environment, but it was good that he talked and worked well with other children he was meeting for the first time.
- It was good that the event was almost entirely in English.
- We rarely have all-English events, so this was a very good opportunity!

Session 3: Let's Play in English! Origami in English

Date: September 8, 2023, 16:00 - 17:00

Location: Biei Town Library

Participants: 6 preschool children, 4 elementary school students

Volunteers: 3 university students

We conducted an activity to learn how to fold origami such as frogs and shurikens in English.

The following is the schedule for the day.

16:00-16:10 Greetings.

16:10-17:00 Origami activity.

Children's Reactions

Three booths were set up where children took turns visiting each booth to learn how to fold origami in English. Although the number of student volunteers was reduced to three due to some being diagnosed with COVID-19,

many parents actively participated because there were many preschool children, which helped avoid major confusion. The participating children appeared to be having a great time.

Children's Feedback

Here are some of the children's comments:

- It was fun.
- I wanted to make more different things.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- This was our first time at such an English event in this area, and I would like it to continue.
- My child seemed to have a lot of fun; please keep these sessions going in the future.

Session 4: Let's Learn About Body Movements and Create a Practice Menu in English

Date: October 29, 2023, 14:00 - 15:30

Location: Fukaya City Library 3F Exhibition Room

Participants: 10 preschool children, 6 elementary school students

Volunteers: 7 university students

We conducted an English activity to create a soccer practice menu.

The following is the schedule for the day.

14:00-14:10 Greetings.

14:10-14:35 Grouping / Game.

14:35-15:10 Let's create a practice menu.

15:10-15:20 Storytelling.

15:20-15:30 Conducting surveys.

Children's Reactions

More than half of the children participated in the program conducted in July. Since there were many preschool children in the July program, some confusion was observed; however, this time, by separating the preschool children and elementary students for instruction, the program was able to proceed more smoothly than in July.

Children's Feedback

Here are some comments from the children:

- It was fun.
- I enjoyed touching my body to the music and playing soccer.
- Next time, I will try to speak English loudly!
- It was fun. I want to come again.

Guardians' Feedback

Here are some comments from the guardians:

- Today's class was divided into groups for preschool children and elementary students, which was better than last time as it was more purpose-specific. It was good for the brain to learn English while being physically active. The last book about the war was read in a soft voice, and my child didn't understand it, so it would have been nice to have some explanation from the teacher afterward.
- We had fun participating.
- Today was full of enjoyable content. Thank you.
- Thank you for your valuable time. I appreciate the environment where English is spoken.
- My child was nervous during the self-introduction and couldn't speak, but by the time we started moving with the soccer, smiles had increased.
- The ball games and video quizzes were easy to understand and enjoyable even for a four-year-old. It was great that the kids were frequently encouraged and seemed to relax. Thank you.
- My child seemed to be having a lot of fun watching videos in English. I know there were many confusing moments, but I was happy that you dealt with the young children with a smile.
- We watched videos in English, and I was surprised that he could say a few body parts. He was scared at first because it was dark.
- The 1.5 hours felt very short because it was easy for young children to understand and was very interesting.

Session 5: Storytime and Story Creation with an English Picture Book: "The Very Hungry Caterpillar"

Date: December 10, 2023, 13:30 - 15:00

Location: Kodaira City Central Library 3rd Floor Audio-Visual Room

Participants: 5 elementary school students

Volunteers: 7 university students

We focused mainly on storytelling activities at the request of the library.

The following is the schedule for the day.

13:30-13:40 Introducing ourselves while singing songs.

13:40-13:50 Storytime with picture books.

13:50-14:10 Story creation.

14:10-14:30 Rehearsal for presentation.

14:30-15:00 Presentation.

Children's Reactions

- Although the participants were quite reserved and had difficulty opening up initially, during the story creation session, they were able to have individual conversations with the university students and seemed to enjoy the creative process.

Guardians' Feedback

Here is a comment from a guardian:

- My child enjoyed the method of thinking about what happens next in the picture book, expressing it through drawings, and learning English from their artwork. We haven't created opportunities for engaging with English outside of lessons yet, but my child seemed to enjoy this lesson format that combines drawing, which is a familiar activity, with new language learning. If there are more classes like this, I would like to send my child again.

Discussion of Fiscal Year 2022

In 2023, activities were conducted in four libraries, and there was a request to include English storytelling sessions in three of these. In Japan, libraries are traditionally viewed as places primarily for providing books, making it challenging to conduct English activities similar to those in South Korea. On the other hand, some guardians, especially in remote areas like Biei Town in Hokkaido, northern Japan, have expressed a desire for the continuation of such activities. There seems to be a demand for libraries to transcend their conventional roles and offer a broader variety of activities.

Conclusion

This study explored the feasibility of establishing English libraries similar to those in South Korea by regularly conducting English-related activities. The findings reveal significant challenges in implementing such programs in Japan as they are in South Korea. In 2022, difficulties included finding libraries willing to host the program and a lack of cooperation from Musashino City in recruiting participants. In 2023, increased collaboration from libraries, particularly in tasks like child recruitment, made it possible to execute the program in four libraries. Nevertheless, some libraries imposed conditions such as mandatory English storytelling sessions for program approval. After two years of practical research, it has become apparent that while replicating the South Korean model of English libraries in Japan is challenging, it is feasible to run similar English programs centered around storytelling activities.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

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