

Book Review

Primary School English-Language Education in Asia: From Policy to Practice

Bernard Spolsky and Young-in Moon (Eds.), 2012. NY: Taylor and Francis.
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This timely and fascinating collection describes the current state of primary school English-language education in China, Japan, Singapore, Korea, India, Vietnam, and Taiwan. The book portrays all these countries as valuing English highly as a language for international communication and wanting to improve the ability of their citizens to use it. English-language education at primary school is seen as an important stepping stone in this process.

The chapters about China, Japan, Korea, India and Vietnam incorporate details of research projects undertaken by their authors and these provide useful insights into the views of primary school teachers. In many countries there seems to be tension and disparity between seemingly well-intentioned education authorities who set educational policy and the classroom teachers who have to implement the policy with students. With reference to data from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations the authors of these chapters show how primary school teachers view the current policies of their respective governments and the extent to which they buy into those policies.

The chapter about primary education in Japan takes a rather different approach by including the results of a survey of high school students about their views of learning English. Unlike the other six countries discussed in this book, English has, perhaps surprisingly, only been a mandatory subject at primary school in Japan since 2011. The survey reflects students' lack of motivation for learning English at high school and a fall in motivation with each subsequent year of English. This is the only chapter in which the research takes into account the views of students, albeit secondary school rather than primary school students.

It is interesting that a number of common issues feature in the current practice of teaching English at primary school in the countries discussed in this book. These include the quality, English language proficiency and qualifications of teachers; teachers' confidence about teaching English as a foreign language; and a lack of resources, and training (both pre-service and in-service). In addition, the challenges of increasing the coverage of primary school English-Language education to all areas of the countries, and particularly rural areas are also mentioned. These issues are clearly highlighted and thoroughly discussed in the articles and demonstrate the sizeable task which educators and teachers face in attempting to increase the quality and coverage of

English at primary school level. The authors suggest practical and constructive solutions in order to address these issues.

Each chapter, with the exception of the chapter on Japan, provides an informative summary of the local history of primary level English language education, helping, to place current developments into perspective. The chapter about Singapore is somewhat different because it is entirely devoted to a history of primary school teaching in that country. The other countries represented in the book seem to be gradually adopting a predominantly communicative approach in primary school teaching in contrast to the previous traditional “chalk and talk” approach. Singapore, however, seems to have enthusiastically embraced, or perhaps lurched between, each new trend in teaching approaches and methodologies over the years but has learned from each experience and settled finally on a communicative and genre-based approach.

The disparity of wealth of the students is mentioned in several chapters of the book but the chapter on India is notable in the way it addresses the issue of disadvantaged children and the desire of the Indian Government to make English available to all. This chapter incorporates the results of a study of teachers in disadvantaged schools in urban Dehli and it is both interesting and heartbreaking to read about the negative attitudes some primary school English teachers have towards their students. Elsewhere in this chapter, other research is used to demonstrate that disadvantaged children can indeed learn English successfully given appropriate tasks, appropriate assessment which does not rely on memorizing the answers in advance, and more sympathetic teachers.

In future editions of this book it would be interesting to see chapters on other parts of the region such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand. Also, despite the challenges of obtaining data from primary school children the inclusion of their voice would complement, in an important way, the excellent research carried out with primary school teachers. It would also be good to see research data added to the chapter on Taiwan.

This book is an essential read for primary school teachers, educators of primary school teachers, and educational policy makers in the Asia region. It would also serve as good additional reading for primary school teachers in training. By highlighting the common challenges faced in the teaching of English at primary school level it helps to fulfil the goal of the Routledge Critical Studies in Asian Education series, which is to encourage educators to share their knowledge and experience and to build a professional community of practice in the region.

About the reviewer

Simon Boynton is a lecturer in the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He has taught English as a foreign language to primary school children, secondary school children, adults, undergraduates, and postgraduates in a number of countries including Poland, Spain, Argentina, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong and the UK. He has also been a Cambridge ESOL teacher trainer. His research interests include popular science writing, critical discourse analysis, and language teaching and learning.