

2010 International Exchange and School Visits in Korea

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This early spring in 2010, a group of 30 committees from Taipei County, including English teachers, administration staffs and officials from the educational bureau, departed for Korea and paid a 5-day visit to several elementary schools. All members are able to observe the local culture and collect first-hand information about Korean English villages, which may be later on served as a useful guide and valuable experience to our own projects.



These school visits are mainly hosted by Sahmyook Educational System (SDA), under a great support from the

Adventist Church, Korea. Although the observations are all made in private Christian schools, there are still some great teaching ideas and resources worth of discussion.

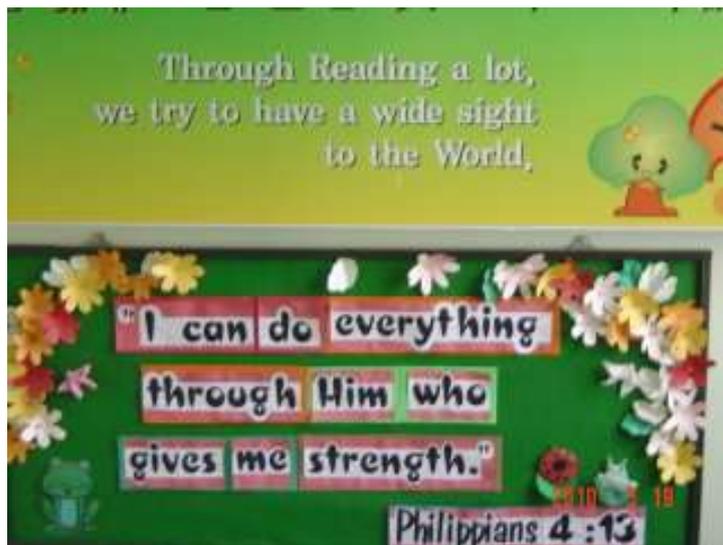
It really was a chance of a life time for us to attend this group, because Taipei County Government has always been very aggressive and saving no efforts on promoting English teaching and learning program. In the following couple of years, there are going to be five English villages built, which benefit the students from the most remote elementary schools who are lacking in language learning stimulus. These English villages come in different styles and functions, which will serve and provide the students a unique English learning experience without having to travel abroad.



On the other hand, Korean Government too has put a lot emphasis on elevating the English ability of the people. Up to now, there are hundreds of English villages built up, and

schools too have been doing their best to meet up the standards. It seems like English learning has become the national sport of Korea!

Among all the schools and English villages, we had visited three elementary schools and two English villages. Their names are as follows: Seohae Sahmyook Elementary School, Taegang Sahmyook Elementary School, Seoul Sahmyook Elementary School, Gyeonggi English Village-Ansan Camp, and Gyeonggi English Village-Yangpyeong Camp.



The elementary schools are really supportive and proud of their students learning outcomes. Teachers are expected to use 100% English while they are teaching, and bilingual posters are to be seen every where, on the hallways, on the pillars, even on the staircases. Each class consists of 20 or so kids and textbooks are mostly

imported from the states.

Several situational classrooms such as airport, fast food restaurant, bank and post office, are decorated and set up to help students dive in the real daily conversation. The foreign teachers will guide students through the topics and



offer them useful

keywords and information so that they won't feel stressful and will open up their mouth and SPEAK!

According to the data provided by the schools, students' performance on English is quite satisfying. The English immersion curriculum really plays a key role in improving students' language ability.

Then, what are the main objectives of this curriculum? They are to nurture international

missionaries, to understand foreign cultures, and to be fluent in English conversation through intensive training. In order to achieve these goals, students have over 11 English learning hours a week, including Math, Bible and Language Arts, and they also attend English Camps. Some students take after school English classes and all English classes are leveled according to students' language skills!

All of us were very surprised to see how the students can interact with their foreign teachers in fluent English. They talk and act with full confidence; they raise questions and show high interests in all topics. Above all, they are very well disciplined!



“To the world, to the space, to Heaven!” is the direction of these schools, and maybe it’s because of this,

the relationship between teachers and students seems to be harmonic, respectful and supportive.

The following days, we visited two English camps, including the most famous English village in Korea, Gyeonggi English Village-Yangpyeong Camp, which is well-known for its beautiful buildings and hi-Tec facilities. The camp also was the shooting scene of a Korean drama “Boys over Flowers”! There are diverse language courses designed for different levels of students and also adults. Each year, 40 thousand students are trained here without having to go abroad. They are able to experience international living and learning style, and for those economic inferior students, they are attending the classes under government’s help. The camp also provides short-term/two-week training for people from Japan, China, and Russia.

“Fostering great leaders” is the motto. In the camp, courses are designed for building students’ global view and communication skills. The atmosphere here makes learners bathe in total American life style, which might help them to think and to act as native speakers.

Under the main purpose of Holistic Education: knowledge, ethics, and health, 9 theme classes are set up for learners, including flight, music, sports, cooking,

photo, insects, dominos, sea mammals, and science.



Students have to take

level test before coming, and a passport will be given to them to mark their beginning point. In the passport, there are tables for students to collect signatures from the foreign teachers after they have passed each task. Ten golden rules and a reward-warning system are also included so that the students know the limit. All participants must only speak English at village, and they are also required to study and review before classes!

There are same amount of foreign teachers and Korean teachers, and they co-teach in classes. All activities are renewed every 6 months, so the learners won't take repeated lessons. After intensive trainings, an overall evaluation will be taken by the learners, both in

oral and written forms. In order to maintain or even boost up students' learning interest, as well as not to be afraid of foreigners, short-term trainings are also provided here. Through well designed programs, such



as dormitory English, activity English, theme English, situational English, and drama, learners are truly motivated. According to their data, there's an over 80% satisfactory rate!

All in all, we do have a clearer look at Korea's attempt to learning English. The Korean government makes great efforts on pushing this trend, so does ours. However, it is not necessary to say that the Korean experience is much valuable than ours, since their young men (around 20) can't even take my order for hot coffee in English! The signs and banners we see on the streets are all in Korean, which is quite impossible for a foreigner to

read or recognize, let alone find the right direction! After all, it's not friendly enough.

In a word, Korean people on the streets don't speak English.

I wonder what happened to those who ever attended English lessons. There's one truth, despite of all the high-end facilities and interesting training programs in the villages and camps, English still seems to be far from control for the Koreans.

On the other hand, Taipei County Government has been pouring all kinds of resources as well as big money in English teaching and learning in the past few years, and this meaningful act now is widely appreciated and also considered as a remarkable milestone. Although few years ago, Taoyuan County did build up English villages, but later on due to some reasons, they failed to function, which is a pity.

Now the officials have learned their lesson, and after several trials and errors, they find a way out. They decided to make good use of the spare classrooms in some remote elementary schools, and transform them into ideal situational learning spots, without spending too much money. Five different camps have different purposes; some are close to the mountain or seaside,

while others are located downtown and equipped with hi-Tec hardware. They believe this can mend the gap between the city and the countryside.



Children who ever attend the 5-day training are eager to come back, for they now understand English is not just a course at school, but a life style! For those who were afraid of speaking up, when they are back to school, they are no longer scared neither frustrated. Learning English now can be as natural as breathing. Gradually in the future, students from urban area also have the opportunity to attend English camps and have a total fresh experience.

A glance at the English teaching and learning situation in Korea helps us to think further and deeper for our own future. Learning is a life time matter, and to

keep the interest from wearing out is an important issue. We teachers need to bear in mind that no matter how extravagant and fancy the facilities can be, if children lose interest in challenging themselves and exploring all possibilities, everything will be in vain!

May all teachers enjoy teaching and have fun. Keep going!