Multicultural Education in Asia and the Role of Language Teaching: Focusing on South Korea

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Asian countries have discussed for decades the necessity of implementing multicultural education as their societies are becoming more global. With the dramatically increasing number of foreign and multiracial/biracial populations in South Korea, public education has a great need for multicultural education and Korean language teaching. However, current assimilation-centered curriculums and a lack of understanding of multiethnic students, their cultures, and their histories have created numerous difficulties in the education practice for both teachers and multiethnic students such as dropping out of schools. Moreover, it hardly narrows the disparities between multiethnic students’ academic gaps and daily life problems in Korea. This study examines general multicultural education in public education in Asian countries with the goal of building more sustainable and inclusive education systems for all learners in South Korea. First, the study focuses on three East Asian countries: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to compare the differences in multiculturalism and multicultural education. Then, the study summarizes their characteristics and approaches to multicultural education. The analysis shows that the three countries have common limitations such as building inclusive curriculums and granting the privilege of using a specific language. Next, this study reviews the critical role of language teaching and learning in multicultural education. Finally, the purpose of this study is to raise awareness about multicultural education and the importance of developing and implementing a better system based on language education.

Keywords: multicultural education, language teaching, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan

1 Introduction

In South Korea (Korea), multiculturalism was forced to emerge because of the increasing number of immigrant workers and minorities which originated from foreign invasions in early history and political-strategic plans to keep the pace with globalism since the 1990s (Ahn, 2012; Lim, 2009; Tanghe, *Bo La Kim*, Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Seoul

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However, multiculturalism has consistently been viewed negatively based on Korea’s excruciating historical background, including the Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and the American intervention (Lee, 2009 as cited in Watson, 2012). As a result, multiculturalism in Korea has been more focused on assimilation as opposed to the maintenance of minority heritages and the promotion of equal opportunities for all (Chang, 2015; Olneck, 2011; Watson, 2012; Yeo, 2016).

A long history of homogeneous perceptions and mindsets among Koreans causes discrimination and conflicts among races. Koreans believe themselves to be ethnically homogeneous, and the distinctiveness and superiority of Korean culture constituted a prevailing ethnic nationalism (Olneck, 2011). The United Nations (UN) recognizes the emphasis of homogeneity in Korea, which can be an obstacle to the promotion of ethnic diversity (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2007). The Committee comments that concepts such as pure blood versus mixed-bloods in Korea may (un)intentionally lead to intolerance and discrimination upon ethnic diversity in Korean society. Consequently, the presence of migrant workers and the growth of their communities become the center of the challenges multiculturalism faces in Korea, yet policies related to multicultural education take little account of migrant workers, their children, and multiethnic children who were born and raised in Korea (Olneck, 2011). As evidenced by this, recent findings show most multiculturalism policies are based on naturalization to Korean language and culture: naturalization programs (54.4%), Korean culture experiences (16.1%), promotion of intercultural understanding in the perspective of Koreans (14.4%), cultural program experiences that target Koreans, and the alleviation of homesickness (2.1%) (Kim, Kang, & Lee, 2014). Almost all the programs focus only on learning the Korean language and the historical perspectives in the position of Koreans’ views. Moreover, Andrew (2010) indicates that Koreans have biased attitudes and discriminative perspectives on specific ethnicities, positive for European westerners or negative for other races, which will eventually bring various issues to the forefront with the expected influx of diverse foreign populations to the area.

Similar to Korea, many East Asian countries and cities have rapidly become more ethnically and culturally diverse with a growing population that includes a number of mixed ethnic individuals by welcoming labor-related immigrants, temporary foreign workers and promoting international marriages (Andrew, 2010; Jackson, 2014; Kim, 2014). However, some researches show significant challenges for multiracial children in Asia as being different from their native populations such as not fitting into the mainstream culture, dietary restrictions based on their religions and lifestyles (Chang, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Olneck, 2011; Tanghe, 2016). In particular, students in ethnic minority groups have suffered from academic difficulties in countries such as Korea and Japan since their academic language