Support of the Project of Improvement of Teachers’ Instruction Methods in Cooperation with the Koshigaya City Education Board

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Abstract

In the curriculum guideline for elementary and junior high schools, which was fully introduced consecutively in 2011 and 2012, it is expected to improve and develop the course of study based on the emphasis on ‘enhancement of language activities’ intended to cultivate the ability to think, judge, express oneself, etc. With this in mind, Bunkyo University and the local education board of Koshigaya City, Saitama Prefecture, which started to cooperate for this research in 2008, are seeking a new direction for the teachers’ training in relation to ‘enhancement of language activities’ that are emphasized in the New Curriculum Guideline and trying to improve and develop the teaching methods of all the subjects. In order to make the teachers’ training successful, one of the objectives has been to train teachers to be ‘literacy leaders (LL)’ who play leading roles of planning, implementing and evaluating the training programs at the city education board and each school. This thesis outlines the progress of cooperative efforts between Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board from 2008 to the present for the purpose of the project of improvement of teachers’ instruction methods and describes the status quo and challenges of approaches to classroom practice and the teachers’ training based on ‘enhancement of language activities’.

1. Reasons for Start of Cooperation between the Koshigaya City Education Board –School Years 2008 and 2009-

In the current curriculum guideline, which was announced on March 28, 2008, ‘enhancement of language activities for all the subjects and other courses’ was proposed as the most important topic for improvement. Specifically, the guideline requires that learning activities be enhanced in order for knowledge and skills acquired in all the subjects

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and other courses to be applied to everyday life through intellectual activities such as logic and thought acquired in each subject and language activities such as ‘communication and other various expressive activities’ based on emotions and feelings. This kind of ‘enhancement of language activities’ across the subjects is the essential factor for cultivation of children’s and students’ key competencies including the power of logical thinking and capacity for problem solving.

From this viewpoint, first of all, Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board, together with local practicing teachers, aimed at researching and developing the training curriculum for ‘enhancement of language activities’ across all the subjects (eight subjects), which was designed mainly for elementary school teachers, as a model curriculum of direct use to classroom teachers. Specifically, Bunkyo University and the education board cooperated to clarify the challenges in classrooms, improve school curriculum and develop teaching methods through classroom practice based on the rearrangement and analysis of the ‘terms for learning’ of each subject by Bunkyo University teachers for the final purpose of conducting basic research intended to train teachers to be ‘literacy leaders’ that can develop and conduct practical classes utilizing ‘enhancement of language activities’ on their own.

(1) Progress and Achievements of Cooperation in School Year 2008

In the school year 2008, cooperation between Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board started when the joint educational research project titled ‘Improvement of Curriculum with Emphasis on Language Activities, and Development of Teachers’ Instruction Methods and Training of Prospective Literacy Leaders for Implementation of Improved Curriculum’, which was supported by the Bunkyo University Dean’s Grant Program (granted program: (1) educational research program), was established.

In the first stage (April, 2008) of this research project, a consultation was held to decide the course of action in the joint project. After that, teachers of the university and the staff of the board held the first meeting to exchange opinions on the themes of ① confirmation of the purpose of the research, ② rearrangement of the terms for learning of each subject and ③ language activities and training plans for the Japanese language classes. First of all, as a basic step to ‘language activities’, Bunkyo University teachers undertook research to analyze and examine the curriculum guideline and textbooks of all the subjects in order to rearrange the ‘terms for learning’, that is, the words and phrases used to teach the basics of each subject effectively and efficiently. Then, the educational researchers of the Koshigaya City Education Board in charge of each subject occasionally participated in the research, and thus the joint research project was started.

Later in the second stage (from May to December), the university discussed with the educational researchers of the board to examine and improve teachers’ instruction methods with an emphasis on ‘language activities’, and the research meetings of all the subjects regarding the training and class models for enhancement of language activities, which were useful for practicing teachers and closely connected to classroom learning, were held under the common title of ‘Language Activities and Training Plan for (name of subject) Class’ six
times in total during the period of the second stage excluding August and November (the Japanese language at the first meeting, mathematics and domestic science at the second, science at the third, life environmental studies at the fourth, social studies, international understanding education and elementary school English at the fifth and music and physical education at the sixth).

In December when the meeting was given to sum up the research process that school year, the style sheet for the summary of research results and the preparation of a progress report was created and delivered by email. The teachers of each subject at the Faculty of Education of Bunkyo University as well as the teachers’ consultants of the Koshigaya City Education Board prepared the progress report, and students of the Education Research Department of the Bunkyo University Graduate School prepared a list of reference literature. Furthermore, in the third stage (January and February), considering the results of this research project, the university and the board applied to the National Center for Teachers’ Development for participation in the ‘2009 Model Curriculum Development Program for Teachers’ Training’ (a training curriculum development program in cooperation of universities and education boards: program conducted at the request of universities). The teachers of Bunkyo University and the teachers’ consultants of the Koshigaya City Education Board cooperated to prepare the application form in which the details of this project such as the purposes and plans of the research were included, and the application was granted without any problems.

In the final fourth stage (March), the research results report was edited, printed and issued, and at the end of March the report, which was intended to be of use as training and classroom materials, was distributed to students and teachers of Bunkyo University, the Koshigaya City Education Board, Koshigaya City Education Center, external education institutes and 45 elementary and junior high schools in the city. In this way, the research results were released to the local education community.

(2) Progress and Achievements of Cooperation in School Year 2009

In the school year 2009, the application, based on the achievements of the joint research project in the previous school year, for the ‘2009 Model Curriculum Development Program for Teachers’ Training’ sponsored by the National Center for Teachers’ Development (located at Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture) was granted. From April on, at the request for development of a ‘model training curriculum’ in cooperation of universities and education boards, which would serve as a useful reference to education boards nationwide, this research was carried out continuously and constructively under the theme of the ‘training of prospective literacy leaders through development and implementation of a teachers’ training curriculum in relation to enhancement of language activities’. The research was proceeded based on the results of the last year, and this research produced good results in relation to the following aspects:

① Application to Teachers’ Training

In the School Year 2009, the Koshigaya City Education Board started the teachers’ training programs named ‘Joint Project of Teacher
Researchers’ and ‘Support of Leaning and Teaching for Schools Requesting for Research’, which are intended to design and improve learning and teaching methods in accordance with the New Curriculum Guideline. This research project was applied to a joint research on the model teachers’ training curriculum, and the results of the joint research were greatly utilized. Particularly, the pioneering studies on ‘enhancement of language activities’ and the ‘terms for learning’ proved to be of great heal to classes of each subject and other opportunities at schools, and the studies were expected to be carried out continuously and constructively in the form of workshop type training for teachers every year.

2 Evolution into Continuous Joint Research

In 2009 and thereafter, Bunkyo University continued the training programs in cooperation with the Koshigaya City Education Board. That school year, the university and the board cooperated to prepare the CD-ROM titled ‘2009 Model Curriculum Development Program for Teachers’ Training: Design and Improvement of Instruction Methods in accordance with the New Curriculum Guideline-Enhancement of Language Activities in each Subject’ and compile the database of the report with the same title for the purpose of providing trainings and workshop for improvement of teaching methods of each subject. A project commissioned with the Model Curriculum Development Program for Teachers’ Training sponsored by the National Center for Teachers’ Development evolved into the continuous study and development of the training curriculum based on the achievements of this research project.

3 Execution of Cooperation Agreement between Bunkyo University and Koshigaya City Education Board

In the past, Bunkyo University cooperated with Koshigaya City Education Board for implementation of the programs such as the ‘Experience as Teachers’ Assistants’ as a part of the ‘Partnership Program’ that was started in 2004, and the ‘Students Participation’ and ‘Volunteer Assistant Teachers’ for research presentations and workshops at schools. In 2008, in ‘Practice, Analysis and Implementation of Education’, which is one of the subjects of the course of the Education Research Department of the Bunkyo University Graduate School, the graduate school students started to conduct practical research as a joint research program, thus strengthening partnership and cooperation with the board. After the achievements of these various cooperative activities were comprehensively evaluated, the ‘Agreement on Training of Teachers and Other Personnel’ was proposed (it was proposed as a general agreement and the terms and conditions were prepared) and, on June 26, 2009, executed by both parties. This agreement is intended for the university and the board to cooperate with each other and utilize their respective strengths to carry out the training project for teachers and other personnel for the purpose of growth and enhancement of education in Koshigaya City.

Within the above-described cooperative framework, the following projects have been continued since the school year 2010.

(1) Current Cooperation Projects

① Joint Venture of Teacher Researchers
A working group, which consists of six members: one leader teacher from Bunkyo University, one teachers’ consultant from the Koshigaya City Education Board and four elementary and junior high school teachers (two elementary and two junior high teachers) requested to participate as ‘teacher researchers’ for improvement of instruction methods, is formed for research of each subject. In this small group workshop, the members discuss the details of the present challenges for schools such as enhancement of language activities in each subject and the methods of understanding the actual conditions of children. Bunkyo University teachers participate in each workshop and provide intensive training to teacher researchers in different ways than they do at lecture meetings. The education board recognizes that the workshops greatly improve the quality and ability of the participating teacher researchers.

In 2010, in the seven working groups for Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, moral education and general learning, the ‘workshops for teaching’ were provided to teachers from all the elementary and junior high schools in Koshigaya City. In 2011, in the seven working groups for life environmental studies, music, art, health and physical education, craft, domestic science and English, the ‘workshops for teaching’ were held. Leader teachers were dispatched from Bunkyo University to all the 14 working groups to provide intensive support to the cooperative research projects in Koshigaya City.

In these ‘workshops for teaching’, the teacher researchers presented their research results in simulated classes, and Bunkyo university teachers commented on the classes and then gave a lecture on how practice and theory were linked. Furthermore, the university teachers explained to the participating elementary and junior high school teachers the necessity for and methods of enhancement of language activities in detail, and deeper understanding were obtained. The workshops were meaningful opportunities for the hosting schools in that the teachers of a hosting school were allowed to take part in discussion on research.

(2) Support of ‘Leaning and Teaching’ for Schools Requesting for Research

Bunkyo University teachers go to the schools requesting for research to conduct in-school workshops, provide ‘interim summary’ guidance and support the establishment of the theme, organization and course of the research. Furthermore, the university teachers give lectures at a research presentation to clarify the relation between the classes of each school participating in the presentation and the methods of learning and teaching based on the New Curriculum Guideline. The city education board praises highly the achievements of this support activity.

(2) Problems regarding Cooperative Training Projects

It is desired that the workshops and discussions will be held frequently enough (three to five times a year) in order for the cooperative research to be at all meaningful. However, since both Bunkyo University teachers and elementary and junior high school teachers are busy, it is very difficult to adjust the schedule so that all of them can participate. Besides, research meetings and workshop classes are scheduled for the daytime on weekdays, all the participating teachers must often
go through procedures for permission to cancel their classes, leave early or visit school.

Furthermore, it is absolutely necessary for teachers of Bunkyo University and teachers' consultants of the city education board to provide training and guidance to teacher researchers in the same manner based on common understanding of the purpose and meaning of teacher researchers such as ‘design and improvement of instruction methods in accordance with the New Curriculum Guideline’ and ‘training of young teachers’.

2. Case: Enhancement of Language Activities in ‘General Learning Classes’

In this section, the summary of the research project by the working group called ‘General (general learning classes)’, to which the authors belong within the context of the ‘Joint Project of Teacher Researchers’, is described as a specific case. The current New Curriculum Guideline, which was introduced to elementary schools in 2011 and then to junior high schools in 2012, states clearly that general learning should be replaced by ‘exploratory learning’. In order for the ‘exploratory learning’ to function well, it is important to emphasize three points: ① problem solving and exploratory activities, ② cooperative learning and ③ emphasis on experience and language.

The working group ‘General’ prepared a basic model of learning process creating ‘exploratory learning’, and selected and indicated the role played by teacher and the key points of the role with a core of activities based on the above-mentioned three points. Furthermore, since the school year 2009, utilizing ① ‘the basic model of learning process (teachers’ role)’ creating ‘exploratory learning’ which was prepared at the end of that year and ② the working group’s version of the ‘check sheet of language activities’ which is prepared every time the group meeting is held (described later), the group has been developing and conducting practical classes to cultivate ‘children’s ability to think, judge and express themselves’ by linking experience closely to language.

In the first school year (2009) that the working group ‘General’ was established, the practice of regular general learning classes was discussed. As a result it was clarified how children were acting with their own critical mind, and some common problems faced by each school were highlighted.

Firstly, each school conducted classes in a spiral learning process following the example of advanced schools, but found difficulty in maintaining students’ motivation. Furthermore, students concentrated only on ‘investigative learning’ and present only secondhand information in class. That is, each school was facing the common problems such as ‘there are class activities but no real learning’ and ‘the quality of learning is not improved in a spiral learning process’.

Secondly, it was necessary to clarify the key points that must be noted by veteran leader teachers to conduct general learning classes effectively in a transition to real ‘exploratory learning’ classes. As the number of newly employed teachers was expected to increase, it was important to make the new teachers understand these key points for future exploratory learning classes.

As a consequence, the research was planned and carried out in the following order:

1) First Year (School Year 2009)-Creation of Environment (Formation of Foundation): The ‘basic model of learning process (teachers’ role)’, which clarifies the points for construction of teaching
units to create ‘exploratory learning’, and the ‘check sheet of language activities’ were prepared. Then, the method of creation of the environment (formation of the foundation) for general learning classes was established based on practical studies.

2) Second Year (School Year 2010)-Activities for Practical Classes: Practical classes conducted utilizing the environment (foundation) created in the first year were checked and modified, and the ‘basic model of learning process (teachers’ role)’, the ‘check sheet of language activities’, which was the version of the working group ‘General’, and the ‘case study on exploratory learning’ were prepared and presented.

In 2010, research meetings were held five times in total. Besides, inspection trips to Tobe Elementary School in Yokohama City, which was deemed one of the advanced schools in terms of ‘general learning classed’, for the purpose of observation of in-school workshops and research classes were made twice, and precious information and knowledge regarding ‘liberal general learning’, ‘contrivance’, ‘items to be learned’, ‘discussion’, etc. Then, one teacher researcher representing the tour group presented a class concerning ‘general learning’. Furthermore, the ‘basic model of learning process’ and the ‘check sheet of language activities’ were prepared for use by teachers in Koshigaya City. During the process of preparation of the model and the sheet, understanding of ‘exploratory learning’, the method of enhancement of ‘exploratory learning’ and the teachers’ role was deepened.

In 2010, based on the achievements until the previous year, research classes were conducted using the ‘basic model of learning process’ and the ‘check sheet of language activities’, which were prepared as described above, mainly in order to improve the model and the sheet as necessary so that they could be easily used by everyone. In the research classes in 2010, the model diagram of the image of a teaching process, in which the aims, purposes, evaluations, comments and remarks could be entered in each process of ‘setting of tasks’ → ‘collection of information’ → ‘arrangement and analysis’ → ‘summary and presentation’ in the spiral conceptual diagram prepared at the end of the previous year to indicate the process of ‘general learning’, was prepared based on the ‘basic model of learning process’.

As shown in this diagram, in ‘exploratory learning’, problem solving learning is repeated and developed as if spiral stairs were climbed. For this kind of learning, it is important to introduce the factors such as the aforementioned ① problem solving or exploratory activities, ② collaborative learning and ③ emphasis on experience and language in classes.

As described above, in 2010, the use of the basic model of ‘exploratory learning’ and the check sheet, which were prepared in the previous year, made it possible to conduct ‘general learning classes’ efficiently and effectively based on the teaching plan made by arranging the teachers’ role and activities for emphasis on ‘exploratory learning’. That is, as had been high on the agenda since the previous year, establishment of teaching plans based on examination of the meaning of the content, methods and purposes of learning in each stage of a learning process instead of just imitating ‘general learning’ classes by the advanced schools was expected to solve the problems such as ‘there are class activities but no real learning’ and ‘the quality of learning is not improved in a spiral
learning process'. In addition, the clear model showing the points that should be noted by the leader teachers to change general learning classes to exploratory learning classes was presented, and it was agreed that this model would be of great use to improvement of teaching methods of teachers in Koshigaya City.

In this way, the working group ‘General’ was able to complete the ‘basic model of learning process’, the ‘check sheet of language activities’, the ‘model diagram of the process of general learning classes’ and other materials in the first course of this research project until the school year 2010.

In the second course of this research project (the school years 2011 and 2012), the ‘Joint Project of Teacher Researchers’ was continued and the four teacher researchers from elementary and junior high schools were newly selected. In the project, practical training and research classes were conducted using the diagram prepared as a result of the research in the previous year, and an inspection trip to Ooka Elementary School in Yokohama City was made for the purpose of observation of workshop classes. Based on the achievements of these activities, the third course of this research project has started since April on 2013.

3. Summary: Challenges for ‘Enhancement of Language Activities’ and Teachers’ Training

So far in this thesis, together with the summary of the achievements of the five years’ cooperation between Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board for the purpose of promotion of ‘enhancement of language activities’, the research and training meetings and research classes held by the working group named ‘General (general learning classes)’, in which the authors participated as leader teachers, have been outlined, and the cooperative activities necessary for ‘enhancement of language activities’ and the development and achievements of the model for implementation of workshops and classes have been described.

‘Enhancement of language activities’ is not a purpose itself but just a methodology for cultivation of the ‘ability to think, judge and express oneself’. The educational purpose of the current Curriculum Guideline is to enable children and students to acquire the ‘power for living’, and for that purpose the well-balanced growth of ‘high academic abilities’, ‘sound mind’ and ‘healthy body’ that are translated into the Japanese words chi (knowledge), toku (morals) and tai (physical health). Concerning the ‘academic abilities’, there are three aspects: ‘acquired ability’ based on basic and fundamental knowledge and skills, ‘applicable ability’ intended to express original opinions by reading information using basic knowledge and skills, and ‘exploratory ability’ intended to draw original conclusions about a variety of questions with no definite answers like the ones treated in general learning classes through investigation, reasoning and discussion and then to continue exploratory activities by recognizing the link between the conclusions and other events. Furthermore, it is necessary to strengthen the ‘ability to think, judge and express oneself’ in order to acquire theses academic abilities, and ‘enhancement of language activities’ is regarded as a methodology for such strengthening.

Consequently, it is important to provide consistent training to practicing teachers so that they can recognize that ‘enhancement of language activities’ in each subject is not a goal itself but a methodology for enabling children and students to
strengthen ‘academic abilities’ through cultivation of the ability to think, judge and express themselves and eventually to acquire the ‘power for living’.

In the case of the cooperation project between Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board, which has been described in this thesis, the ‘basic model of learning process’ indicating the role that should be noted by teachers and the key points of the role, the ‘check sheet of language activities’ for each working group and the ‘model diagram of the process of general learning classes’ by the working group ‘General’ were completed as a result of the research. At present, each working group consisting of six members is continuing research for each two-year course using these materials in order for the instruction methods of veteran teachers to be practiced continuously at schools. Furthermore, in each group, mid-level and young teachers who will play a vital role in the future are trained to be literacy leaders through improvement and development of new instruction methods by support of the university teachers and teachers’ consultants. It is concluded that this research project is mutually beneficial and advantageous, in that a variety of achievements in the project is not only of great significance to both the university and the education board in terms of practice of education and training of teachers but also of use to the classes and drills at schools. The approach of the teachers training aimed at improvement of instruction methods based on ‘enhancement of language activities’ is considered to be steadily producing great results.

(Supplementary Note)

This thesis summarizes part of the joint research of the Shonan institute of General Research of Bunkyo University in 2012, based on ‘How to Support the Project for Improvement of Teachers’ Instruction Methods in Cooperation with the Koshigaya City Education Board—Focus on Construction of Model of Framework for Support of ICT Application’ (representative of research: Masahiro Teshima and person in charge: Koichi Imada) issued by the institute.

Reference

・‘Improvement of Curriculum with Emphasis on Language Activities, and Development of Teachers’ Instruction Methods and Training of Prospective Literacy Leaders for Implementation of Improved Curriculum—Educational Research Supported by the Bunkyo University Dean’s Grant Program: report on research results issued by the Faculty of Education of Bunkyo University in March, 2009
・‘Design and Improvement of Instruction Methods in accordance with the New Curriculum Guideline—Enhancement of Language Activities in each Subject’ ’2009 Model Curriculum Development Program for Teachers’ Training’ issued by Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board in March, 2010 (CD-ROM)
・‘Plan of Learning Activities by Research Team on In-School Workshops’ by Model School for Research on Schools Promoting Enhancement of Academic Abilities in the 2011 Program for Enhancement of Academic Abilities of Children in Yokohama City:
issued by Ooka Elementary School in Yokohama City on January 27, 2012

- ‘Design and Improvement of Instruction Methods in accordance with the New Curriculum Guideline: Enhancement of Language Activities in each Subject’ for Implementation of Classes by Teacher Researchers and other Personnel in 2011: issued by the Koshigaya City Education Board in March, 2012 (CD-ROM)
- ‘Fifth Report by Educational Research Committee’: issued by the Koshigaya City Education Board in March, 2012

In addition, other materials including ‘Research on Improvement of Instruction Methods in 2008-2012’ prepared by Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya City Education Board, the draft guideline for research classes submitted at each meeting of the working group ‘General’ in the context of the Joint Project of Teacher Researchers and the reports on achievements were used for reference.