

Early education enhances linguistic ability

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By Kim Hyun-bin

English is a crucial factor in growing up in Korea as it is the only subject that is required for university entrance or for employment, so it becomes natural for parents to try to give their children a head start in the race.

However, on Dec. 27, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced plans to ban teaching English to children at kindergartens and daycare centers.

The government explained this was in line with a new law banning English education for first and second graders, scheduled to take effect starting the new school year in March.

The ministry claimed that teaching English at a young age was less effective and could cause stress for young children.

"Many experts believe the process of learning English is too stressful and less effective for young children," said Kwon Ji-young, a director of early childhood education, at the MOE. "English will be provided in classes starting in 3rd grade, so English classes before this only become early preparation for elementary school."

However, the ban, which was scheduled to take effect in the new school year in March has been delayed after thousands of parents filed petitions on the Cheong Wa Dae website asking the government to scrap the plan.

"We realize there is a lack of a consensus in society regarding the plan," said the education ministry in a statement. "We will collect public opinion for the next few months and decide whether to allow English classes in public kindergartens by early next year."

Despite the government's efforts to ban English classes, many professors are against the ministry's policies, pointing to several successful studies of early childhood education.

Most professors agree that excessive English learning for young children is not recommended, but scores of studies show that creating an exciting environment to learn English has a positive effect and is likely to enhance a child's English ability.

"Trying to cram English into a young child will bring more stress and lower results," said Kil Roun-lee, a professor of English literature at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. "They should learn English through songs and games. They will be able to pick up a few words here and there, and will be able to naturally encounter foreigners starting at a young age."

In 2016, Kim Geun-young a professor of psychology at Sogang University conducted a study with a group of two to five year olds. He separated them into two groups A and B. Group A was given 30 minutes of English class a week, while group B had no encounter with the language. After eight months, group A's speaking abilities were four times higher than that of Group B.

However, some experts point out that children in kindergarten and day care need to learn their native tongue before starting a second language as it could cause confusion to the child.

They also point out that learning a second language early on could hinder the child's creativity.

"A study shows that a child is able to learn and comprehend starting in second and third grade," said Chung Shun-ah, a professor at the department of child studies and welfare at Sookmyung Women's University. "A child should learn its own language first before learning a second language. Even though the child starts learning English in third grade, he wouldn't be far behind a child who started learning from kindergarten."

The MOE passed a special act on standardizing public education in 2014, which prohibits kindergartens and after-school programs at public elementary schools to teach English before the third grade.

The law aimed to prevent public schools from teaching English before the official curriculum stipulates its start set by the government.

However, the proposed act sparked criticism that the ban could aggravate an already serious private tutoring problem, as more parents will spend

more money to provide their children with a separate English education, which less well off families won't be able to afford.