

English Education in Korea: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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The year was 1971, Park Chung-hee's Third Republic, and Kim Daejung had just shocked President Park by almost beating him in the presidential election. It was then that this writer came to Korea and began to observe the many changes taking place in all facets of Korea. Not least among these have been the changes that have occurred in the area of English education, aspects which are the topic of discussion here.

English Everywhere

English, in its written form, at least, seems pretty much ubiquitous in Korea. A walk through Seoul's Myeongdong district will quickly confirm this. It is quite difficult to find a storefront sign that is not in English. Brand names, whether foreign or Korean, appear in English. This was not the case forty years ago. Then, the same Myeongdong area sported an English sign here and there. Many signs were in Hangeul, but many more were in Chinese characters, which were thought of as being more formal than Hangeul. The English appearing on storefront windows was usually not intended to be read, but merely there as decoration to indicate that the wares inside were quality products (suggesting that they were foreign-made).

Similar to signboards, the newspapers and magazines of four decades past carried very little in English other than an occasional initialism or acronym of a proper name such as "UN" or "CIA." Because of the abundance of Chinese characters used in 1970s' newspapers, the college student of today would not be able to read them. English loanwords, too, were then a meager portion of the Korean vocabulary, in stark contrast to the inundation we see and hear today, over 20% by some counts.

The English Classroom

The comforts and conveniences of today's classrooms are taken for granted. The air-conditioning, central heating, and even the computer are all commonplace. The coal briquette- or sawdust-fueled potbelly stove of the '70s failed to keep out the winter cold just as the electric fan failed at bringing the classroom down to room temperature. Classrooms were larger then, holding 60-70 high school students, compared to the 30-40 of today. The single fan or heater per classroom was no match for the extremes in temperature. Language learning materials are readily available for use in today's classroom – games, activity sheets, songs, storybooks, readers, PowerPoint presentation



▲ A typical Korean high school classroom of the 1970s.

capabilities, and an Internet connection that opens up the world of resources to the classroom. The classroom of the early '70s, however, was pretty much barebones, containing little more than the students' textbooks and activity books, and if lucky, a cassette tape recorder with dialogue tapes to listen to and repeat after. Study conditions were much less comfortable and study materials and equipment were much less available.

The English Teacher

The public school English teacher in Korea today is quite lucky in that there are a wide variety of in-service training programs available, both during vacation time and during the school term. Transportation and lodging expenses are provided, as are those for trips abroad for training. The school teacher is more traveled and has an international awareness. They have satisfactory communicative English skills and are versed in a variety of teaching methodologies. However, they still favor outdated, inefficient methods that may be helpful in raising student scores on standardized examinations in their test-driven world, but do very little to raise their English skills level. The English teacher of the 1970s had very little contact with English in use and only limited communicative skills. Their English pronunciation, still bearing a strong influence of the Japanese colonial period, was far from native-like. "This is a book" sounded more like "Disu iju booku." Teaching methods relied heavily on translation with grammar and vocabulary explanations. However, the English teacher was motivated, and was recognized as the brightest and most able of teachers, as English was considered the most difficult of subjects.

The English Student

The secondary school student of the '70s was much like the student of today in that they were both overworked and sleep-deprived due to study for school examinations and ultimately the college entrance examination, on which English, Korean, and mathematics were tested. Today's student began English in the third year of elementary school, but likely studied at a language school or kindergarten at an earlier age. The student of the '70s began English study in middle school. Language school English study is now common throughout the primary and secondary school years; study abroad is becoming more and more common. But in the '70s, the English *hagwon* was a rarity and study abroad was an impossibility. The importance of English for testing purposes has continued to provide external motivation for the English student, but it is only the more recent learner who more clearly sees how English ability can impact their future.

The NEST

The native English-speaking teacher (NEST) of the 1970s was quite a different person than the NEST of today and was found in far fewer numbers. Back then, there were a scattered few native-speaker missionaries teaching at Christian schools, but the common NEST was a US Peace Corps volunteer teaching at the middle school or university level for a two-year period of service. The Peace Corps NEST was typically a recent college graduate with no TEFL training other than the basics received in Peace Corps training. Today NESTs of various nationalities are found at every level of public and private English education, and qualifications required for employment are constantly rising with the increasing availability of distance TESOL certificate and degree programs.

Spoken English

The lost English speaker in Korea in need of directions has little difficulty today in finding help from a Korean. The English may not be polished, but communication can take place. The

younger half of the population will likely be able to help more easily. This is because they began their formal public school English classes when they were in the third year of elementary school. Many attended private English classes even earlier and throughout their middle and high school years in addition to university. Many of them probably had a native English-speaking instructor at some point in their language learning years. Regardless, comprehensible input can be easily found: English movies, English radio and TV stations, English TV programs, even English language church services, and an Internet full of all kinds of spoken English.

On the 1970s street, the same lost English speaker would have had much more difficulty getting help in English. Koreans were more inclined to avoid the English-speaker for fear of embarrassment at not being able to speak English adequately. At that time, English instruction began in middle school, while only elementary school education was mandatory. Many could not afford to go on to middle school, high school, and university. English language schools were few, and those with native English-speaking teachers were rare. (The only one in Gwangju was the Seventh Day Adventist English Institute.) Other reasons for the lower quality of spoken English among the Korean populace were less availability of quality language learning materials, less effective teaching methods, less-well-trained instructors, few opportunities to practice English speaking, and the inability to travel abroad.

Teaching Methodology

English teaching in Korea is highly test-driven, particularly at the high school and tertiary levels with the high-stakes college entrance exam and TOEIC test determining students' futures. Test-driven instruction is typically teacher-centered and memorization-heavy. Communicative and student-centered approaches take a back seat; however, they are not unheard of. Communicative approaches with student interaction are increasing with younger, lower-level students and in programs at all levels with courses taught by NESTs. Many classrooms are now high-tech, with Internet access and PowerPoint capabilities. Their easy accessibility to a wide range of instructional tools and materials is affecting change in classroom EFL methodology. The Korea of the 1970s was very much test-driven as well. Instruction was teacher-centered and students were expected to memorize huge amounts of grammar rules and lexical items. The grammar-translation method was quite healthy, but the audio-lingual method was also making inroads. High schools and universities were setting up expensive, well-equipped listening labs stocked with cue-response drill tapes for the students to practice. However, the high school labs became unused exhibits of the modernity of the school's English program, being frequented more by the visitor than by the student.

Student Learning

Today's student has a wide range on English learning opportunities available. Public school classes for English begin in Grade 3 of elementary school (possibly Grade 1 very soon) and continue through high school. There are after-school classes for elementary school students and supplementary classes for secondary school students. English is taught in kindergarten and pre-school, and there are language institute programs available for all levels. Television provides movies and series of all types as well as English learning programs, as does the Internet. And many families opt to send their children abroad for some type of English schooling or training. The 1970s' options were much more limited. English classes only started in middle school, but the week was 5.5 days long (a half day on Saturdays). There were once-a-week special activities

clubs in elementary school, of which one was English, but very few other learning opportunities or materials were available. There were no TV programs in English or for English learning, and there was no Internet. One could not even use a short-wave radio to listen to BBC or VOA because SW radios were illegal to own – national security concerns. It was only the very lucky student who had a tape recorder and English tapes to use with it.

Biggest Problems

What has long been, and still remains, one of the biggest obstacles to learning English for the Korean learner is the lack of confidence in using the language, due to the reliance on memorization rather than on practice. Another problem is the student work ethic: many learners are unwilling to invest the time and effort that is required to learn a foreign language, and are in an eternal search for an easy way to learn English. Many students are not aware of effective learning strategies or of how to be an effective autonomous learner, relying on memorization rather than skills practice. The biggest problems for the teaching of English in Korea include the college entrance examination. As long as the English portion of this exam focuses on grammar and vocabulary, English skills will be ignored in secondary school. Another serious problem is administrators and policymakers. The people making the critical decisions concerning English language planning are often individuals with little or no background in ELT, SLA, or applied linguistics. The influence of parents on policymakers and administrators is often stronger than that of language teachers and specialists, and the private language school rather than the public school often seems to be the primary source of English education.

Prospects

Despite the challenges that English education continues to face, there has been a continuous increase in the need for English proficiency among Koreans and a continuous increase in the English proficiency of the general populace. The variety and number of jobs requiring a high proficiency in English skills is also expected to increase. As long as the need for English skills remains high, the trend of increased proficiency is expected to continue. The improvements in instructors' language skills and teaching skills are expected to lead to increased levels in learner proficiency. As instructors' proficiencies increase, the need for NESTs in teaching language learners is expected to gradually decrease, while the usefulness of qualified NESTs as teacher trainers will be realized.

A lot has changed on the English education scene between the time of President Park Chung-hee and that of his daughter President Park Geun-hye, and such changes can be expected to continue at an accelerating pace into the future.

About the Author/Presenter

David E. Shaffer is a longtime resident of Korea and has for many years been a professor at Chosun University in Gwangju. He has taught linguistics, teaching methodology, and English skills courses in the graduate and undergraduate programs. Dr. Shaffer has written books and many articles on Korea, Korean language, and Korean poetry in addition to teaching and learning English. He is presently Korea TESOL First Vice-President and President of the Gwangju-Jeonnam Chapter. He is active in presenting at ELT conferences in Korea and internationally, and is presently on the executive boards of Asia TEFL and ALAK. Dr. Shaffer has recently been conferred the Republic of Korea's Order of Merit (Service), a presidential award.