

## Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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Education systems throughout the world encourage their students to learn languages other than their native one. In Australia, our Education Boards provide students with the opportunity to learn European and Asian languages. French, German, Chinese and Japanese are the most popular languages studied in elementary and high schools. This choice is a reflection of Australia's European heritage and its geographical position near Asia. In most non-English speaking countries, English is the foreign language most readily available to students. In Korea, the English language is actively promoted by the Education Department and, in less official ways, by companies and the public. It is impossible to be anywhere in Korea without seeing the English language alongside or intermingled with Korean. When I ask students why they are learning English, I receive answers that include the word globalization and the importance of English throughout the world. When I press further and ask why they personally are learning English, the students mention passing exams, usually high school tests or TOEIC, and the necessity of passing the latter to obtain a good job. Seldom do I ever hear anything about communication: about the desire to talk with other people in English, to read novels or poetry in English, to understand movies or pop-songs in English, to chat on the Internet in English, to search for information on the

Internet in English, or to email pen-pals in English. Yet isn't communication the only valid reason for learning a language? We learn our native language to communicate with those around us. Shouldn't we set the same goal for learning a foreign language? In my opinion communication, whether it is reading and writing or speaking and listening, must be central to language learning. Learning a language to pass examinations is meaningless unless those examinations are a reliable indicator of the ability of the student to communicate. In previous eras, most communication in a foreign language was through reading novels or formal letters. This required a thorough knowledge of grammar and a large vocabulary. Today's communication is much less formal. Telephone conversations, tele-conferences, faxes and emails allow people to communicate regularly and informally. Reading materials are also less formal as popular novels and newspapers are available world-wide. Movies and popular songs have added to the range of informal communication available. Finally travel has ensured that people from different cultures will meet easily and regularly. This informal communication requires less emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and more emphasis on comprehension and confidence to speak. Placing communication central to language learning has important implications for the Education system and for teachers.

## BACKGROUND

Before I begin speaking about teaching English, I would like to let you know a little about my qualifications and teaching experience. I qualified with a Bachelor of Arts and a Graduate Diploma of Elementary Education in 1981. I taught in elementary schools for seven years. I then had an opportunity to transfer to high school teaching. In my state, middle school and high school is combined and consists of 3 years junior high and 2

years senior high. I completed the training for this transfer and began teaching English Literature and History in 1988. I taught in this area for 7 years and was Acting Head of Department for both English Literature and History during this time.

In 1995, I resigned as a high school teacher and returned to University to gain qualifications as a TESOL teacher. After this study, I worked for 2 years in a language college. Here, I taught both adults and high school students. The adults were in General English classes and came from a variety of European and Asian countries. The high school students were predominately Asian and were improving their English skills before entering Australian high schools. They were taught an English language course as well as a variety of high school subjects Math, Science, History, English Literature in English. These were actually immersion courses with controlled vocabulary and grammar that had been developed by the college staff.

After listening to students speaking about their countries, I decided I wanted to travel to some of these places. Therefore, in June 1997, I arrived in South Korea to work with EPIK English Program in Korea. I was assigned to Tong Taejon High School and taught English Conversation to Years 1 and 2. These were normal Korean high school classes of 48-54 students. I used the required Korean English Conversation Textbook as well as a large number of resources I developed myself. I taught these classes by myself even though I was unable to speak any Korean to help with instructions or explanations. Despite this or perhaps because of this the classes progressed well and the students confidence to speak English improved markedly during the 12 months I taught there.

In July 1998, I began teaching at the Foreign Language Education Center (FLEC) at Kongju National University. Here fourteen-week

General English classes for adults from the local community and university students are taught. There are also courses for middle school and elementary school students. In vacation sessions we also offer seven-week Intensive courses where the 4 skills reading, writing, speaking and listening are taught separately. In each of these courses an appropriate ESL course book is used. It has been an interesting and valuable experience to discuss with the university students their reasons for learning English and their experiences of learning English during their middle and high school years. It has also been interesting comparing the attitude the different age groups exhibit towards the English language.

It is from this background that I would like to share some of my thoughts of teaching English to Korean students. I certainly do not claim to be an expert teacher. In fact after 18 years in the profession, I am still learning new things about teaching each day. Neither do I claim to be an expert on the Korean Education system. I have been here for just over 2 years and have only a general idea of teaching English in middle and high schools in Korea. I do, however, have some opinions on desired outcomes for students of English. These opinions have been developed over a number of years through discussions with teachers of LOTE (Languages Other Than English) in high schools at home, with ESL teachers and through readings in this area. I also would like to share some practical activities and methods that have helped me over my years of teaching.

## REASONS FOR LEARNING ENGLISH

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## THE SYSTEM TEACHERS OPERATE WITHIN

The focus of this paper is on teaching rather than Education systems. However, it is the role of teachers to operate within the given system and provide the best chance of success for their students. Therefore a brief look at some aspects of the Korean Education is necessary. As I said previously, I have only a superficial knowledge of this system. However, some aspects were immediately obvious as soon as I starting teaching in Korea. The most outstanding aspect was the overwhelming importance of the third year high school examination. It seemed that for three years the energies of both teachers and students were focused solely on this event. The type of examination set for many subjects was another aspect that gained my attention. Multi-choice examinations have only a minor role in Australian schools. The students I taught at the language college had talked about their schooling. However I was unprepared for the predominance of that type of examination. The third area that was noticeable was class size. Thirty students is the maximum class size in Australian high schools and some classes will have as few as fifteen students. Classes of fifty or more students were a little daunting at first.

Although other aspects of Korean schools were different from those of Australian schools, the three I have mentioned have an impact on teaching methods and especially the teaching of English as a foreign language. They are interrelated and influence each other in a way that for one to change the others must also. Class sizes dictate the type of teaching and learning available and this, of course, influences the type of examination. In a class of thirty or less, a variety of examining methods are possible. A foreign language class in Australia would have a mixture of oral examinations and essays as well as a number of vocabulary, comprehension and grammar tests. Multi-choice examinations, if included, would be only a minor part of this procedure. This variety is possible because the teacher is dealing with fewer than thirty students in each class. This class size also allows the emphasis of teaching and testing to be placed on the students speaking ability. Conversely, the importance placed on the students speaking ability by the Education system has dictated that class sizes are small. Linked to these two aspects are the requirements for University entrance. Again speaking ability is given importance and is an integral part of the testing.

I have included this information to show that, even if a teacher acknowledges the importance of communication when teaching a foreign language, it is not a simple task to make communicative features a central part of teaching. While the university entrance exam and large classes remain a part of Korean schools, multi-choice examinations will also remain. The teachers problem is how to include communicative features without lessening their students chances of doing well in that final examination.

This area has focused mainly on the high school teacher. However, there is a further change that will confront the middle school teacher in a year or two. In the near future, their students will have already studied

English in elementary school. This learning seems to emphasize speaking. Therefore, the middle school teacher will soon have a very different type of student one who has learnt English through song, chant, speaking and listening. The most notable difference will be the confidence these students have in their ability to speak English. This time the teachers problem will be how to include communicative features while introducing the more formal aspects of language learning.

## ATTITUDE TOWARDS SPEAKING ENGLISH

One thing that always surprises me is a Koreans comment that they cant speak English this is often said in excellent English. When I arrived at Tong Taejon High School, I made a point of saying Hello, Good Morning or How are you? to students as I walked around the school. The immediate response was an outburst of giggles from the girls and silence from the boys. Occasionally a brave student would say hello but only after I was well down the hallway, almost out of hearing. It was a source of wonder to me that students who had learned English for at least three years could not or would not speak it. I realized that, as a foreigner, I was a novelty. However these same students had no hesitation in wishing me good morning in Korean. It seemed to me that a tremendous effort was being expended to teach and learn English. However, the resulting ability to use the language was in no way equal to the effort.

As I met and spoke with more Koreans, I found this lack of confidence was wide-spread. Whenever I complimented someone on their speaking skills, I was told by them, in all sincerity, that their English ability was really very poor. At first I wondered if this was natural modesty. However, I soon realized that it was a firmly held belief. It seemed that



any spoken English that was not perfectly correct in use of vocabulary, use of grammar and use of correct expression was regarded as incorrect English. Therefore, people who could communicate well were convinced that they had few skills. I found that my most important task as a teacher was not teaching English. It was finding a method to convince my students to speak with confidence.

One other aspect of interest is that many students believe that speaking English to a native speaker is the only valid way of using their communicative skills. I have often heard the comment that I am the first foreigner they have met and that they couldnt practice speaking English without knowing an English speaking foreigner. Related to this belief it one held by some teachers and university students studying English Education. Many have told me that they cannot conduct a lesson in English. Surprisingly it is not their students lack of English that deters them. It is the belief that they may make a mistake and teach incorrect pronunciation to their students. These attitudes have prevented the development of communicative skills and have given an undeserved importance to native speaker teachers.

## METHODS AND ACTIVITIES TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH

There are many things a teacher can do to encourage their students to speak English. Some, like an English Club or a pop song group, need extra time and organization. While teachers participate in these extra-curricular activities, it can be a problem finding the time and energy to make them as productive as we want them to be. What is needed are methods and activities that can be done within the constraints of large classes and the demands of the third year final exam. The simplest and

the most important thing a teacher can do is to speak English on as many occasions as possible. This quickly becomes incidental teaching and has a positive influence on the students communicative skills. It is also efficient in that it needs no preparation by the teacher.

The classroom is the most obvious place for this to happen. Each English lesson gives many opportunities for classroom instruction and general comments. It is certainly easier and more natural for the teacher and students if these are given in Korean. However the benefits the students gain by hearing English used in everyday situations make it a worthwhile activity. The classroom, for that lesson, can become part of an English speaking country. The teacher and the students become inhabitants of that country. Using incidental English while teaching the formal aspects of the language will, over time, become a natural part of the lesson. In these sections, the language is used in a relaxed manner. It is not something that has to be learned and will be tested.

By this method students will learn simple instructions such as Take out your books and Please be quiet. The level of this incidental English will, of course, depend on the students ability. However, even beginner learners of English can understand classroom instructions in English when they are accompanied with actions. Within the first week, my youngest Kids class all chant Pencils down as we finish an activity. When I started teaching overseas students, I became very aware of classroom language. I could no longer assume that it would be understood. It was then that I realized the large number of simple instructions given each lesson. I also realized that it was a wonderful way to increase the students listening skills. Communicative theory promotes the benefits of real life situations. Listening to their teacher speak English in the classroom is certainly a real life situation for students.

Incidental classroom English also is an excellent method of promoting the students speaking skills. One of the major problems of teaching English to a large class is the difficulty of giving students a chance to speak. However, many students need to ask questions of their classmates or teacher during a lesson. Encouraging the students to do that in English will give them a number of opportunities to practice speaking. A request as simple as Can I borrow your ruler? or How do you spell \_\_\_\_\_? allows the student to use the language in a meaningful way. It will take time for students to remember to use English. However, over time it will develop as a natural response to the teacher giving instructions and asking questions in English. These activities are also beneficial in that they do not take time away from the important task of formal teaching.

The main benefit for students, however, is that they have a role model in their teacher. A native speaker is expected to speak English well so listening to a native speaker does not convince the students that they, too, can speak well. Their teacher is Korean like them and is often already admired. Listening to their teacher speak informal English quickly convinces the student that they can use this language. When I first conversed with teachers at Tong Taejon High School, students who overheard us were convulsed with laughter. Soon they were interested enough to listen. Later, they spoke of their surprise that a Korean teacher could speak English so well. These events gave the students courage to use the language in informal situations. As the year progressed, more and more students were greeting me and asking me questions. The students had taken those teachers as their role model and this gave them the confidence to communicate in English.

A secondary benefit of hearing a teacher use English incidentally is that the students discover that the language actually works. It is

wonderful to see the surprise on the faces of middle school students when they realize that their response *Im fine, thank you. And you?* is correct and even gets an answer. Too many students study English as if it is only something that must be memorized and reproduced at examination time. They seem not to understand that the main function of any language is to communicate. When students speak informally, they take the language from the textbook and use it as the living language it is. They are gaining additional benefit from those hours of study and, more importantly, they are gaining a skill that they can improve and use for the rest of their life.

Speaking English in casual conversation also promotes a feeling of ownership of the language. Too often a foreign language remains part of another culture and is viewed as something alien found only in textbooks. Using the language makes it part of the students culture. This means that the language can be used when and where the student wants to use it. It prevents the belief that only native speakers can pronounce English correctly and that conversation practice must occur with foreigners. This is particularly important for the English language because it is the official language of many countries so there is no one correct pronunciation and no native speaker can claim their country as this languages owner. Also travelers and businesspeople from all over the world regularly use English to communicate whether it is their first or other language. It is definitely a global language and as such must belong to everyone.

Another important point about using English in the classroom is that whenever possible it should be English only. I have watched my young students when I have had a Korean teaching assistant helping me. My first instruction to the teaching assistant is not to speak Korean unless I ask for a translation. Too many children get into the habit of politely waiting for me to finish speaking in English and then swing their head

around to the assistant waiting for the same information in Korean. They are completely ignoring the informal English which is a major part of all lessons. A survey would show that simple instructions such as Turn to page \_\_\_ or Hyun Joo, would you shut the door, please take up a large percentage of class time. Using English for this aspect of teaching means the teacher has significantly increased the time students are learning English and has done this with no extra preparation and without the pressure of testing.

There are many other methods for promoting spoken English. Some need little input from the teacher while others require detailed preparation. One simple activity is for students to form small groups that meet informally at lunch time to speak English. It is a common thing to see groups of students speaking a foreign language in the playgrounds of Australian schools. These students have no access to a native speaker of the language they are studying. However, they know that a significant part of their marks will be a spoken test. The only method to practice is to speak with fellow students. Seeing English language groups in Korean playgrounds would encourage all students to view speaking English as a normal part of their life. Again this activity takes English out of the text books and presents it as a living language.

An interesting activity of many Australian schools is Language Day. Many school teach only one foreign language. In elementary and junior high school the subject includes both the language and the culture of the country. On the day designated as Language Day, students must speak only that language. They also present the food, dances, music and costumes of that country to other students and to members of the local community. It does require a huge amount of preparation by the teachers and, usually, from parents also. However, it has an important impact on the audience. The language is seen in context and inspires interest in

many people. Again the main goal is to remove the language from the textbook and present it as a living language.

All teachers of English will be able to add scores of activities to those I have mentioned. The largest problem for teachers in Korean schools is not finding the activities but finding methods to teach communicative English within the constraints of the curriculum and examination requirements. As I have emphasized, the actual activities used are less important than the attitude teachers show towards English. The teachers are the most important role models the students will encounter. If teachers indicate, by their attitude and teaching methods, that English has only correct and incorrect answers that must be learned to gain a good score in examinations, students will treat the language accordingly. If, however, teachers use English as a part of everyday life while they are teaching the required aspects, students will regard English as a language that is relevant to their life and one that they can own and use when and where needed.

I hope that my thoughts on teaching English to speakers of other languages will be of some help to you. I do realize that the current teaching methods are very successful for the important final high school examination. I am, however, saddened when I see the long hours Korean students study English and the small returns they gain in the communicative aspect of the language. I do believe that communication is a vital part of language learning as it is the aspect that remains long after all examinations are over and is a skill that students can practice and use all their life. I also believe that with small changes this aspect can be promoted in the classroom without detracting from the necessary formal teaching. I'm looking forward to seeing students enter the university confident in their right to converse in English and eager to improve this skill through practice.