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The Positive Role of Mother Tongue as Written Form in English Class

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Using mother tongue in English classroom is controversial. Native speaking instructors seem to be for English-only classes whereas many Korean teachers of English feel it's effective to conduct classes in Korean especially for explaining usages and functions of certain grammar or new vocabulary. In fact, many studies have supported using mother tongue. However, excessive use of it hinders students from practicing the target language. Obviously it doesn't necessarily have to be all or nothing system. The study shows the positive role of mother tongue in written form based on the results of the students' academic performance at Chung-Ang University's summer program 2000. The results indicate that using mother tongue in written form helps beginning level students understand grammar and vocabulary more effectively, leads them to do better on tests than those of English-only class, and encourages them to actively get involved in class discussion and responses.

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a controversy on the issue of using mother tongue in English classes. Throughout the years of English teaching, many Korean teachers of English have been teaching their students English in Korean with an emphasis on grammar with the translation method. Apparently, there may be a number of reasons to this phenomenon but the reality lies in the fact that many of non-native teachers do not feel comfortable using or are not fluent enough to conduct their

classes in the target language. Concerned with the current status of English teaching, the Ministry of Education felt the urgent need for communicative teaching in the language and implemented an EPIK (English Program in Korea) hiring as many as tens of thousands of native speakers to pour into the classrooms of middle and high schools. College level institutions also went along with such national demand and emphasized on the native speaking instruction on their campuses. With such an influx of foreign teachers into the classrooms, a great deal of opportunity was given to those students to acquire the language through Korean and native teachers of English. Then the questions pop up: Are the students really happy with all English speaking classes regardless of their levels by native speaking instructors? Do they understand their teachers, utilize their chances of language learning efficiently? These questions prompted the study to learn the role of mother tongue in English classes. And a further question arises: If it is allowed to use it, then to what extent and in what form?

The writer has studied in the previous paper whether mother tongue should be used in English classroom (Lee, 1997). However, speaking mother tongue often deters some students from fulfilling their motivation for learning English by sticking to their comfortable L1. Hence, this deterrence prompted to study in terms of using mother tongue only as written form on the board as opposed to using both speaking and written Korean in the previous study.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As English language teaching in Korea expanded, there seem to be not enough cooperation between Korean teachers of English and native English speaking teachers. The need for the target language as the language of classroom management and instruction is obvious and it is of great importance that students are exposed to the target language as much as is reasonably possible. But non-native speakers, or Korean teachers who still make up the vast majority of language teachers have been feeling either defensive or guilty at their inability to “match up” to native speakers in terms of conducting a class entirely in English. Many may have tried to switch to an “all-English classroom”, but soon found themselves inadequately ready to get their meaning across. They then revert to use mother tongue upon facing with students’ incomprehension and resentment.

Consequently, most of their strategies go back to teaching them with grammar-based instructions, leaving native speaking teachers responsible for communicative or conversational English.

On the other hand, it seems that many native speaking instructors hold assimilationist view that is favoring English-only in classes against those who hold cultural pluralist view, favoring inclusion of the native language according to Secade & Lightfoot (1993). And this view is presumably due to their inability to speak the students' native language. The question of how many native speaking teachers actually learn the Korean language to teach their students more effectively still remains. Evidently, there have been two different roles between the two groups of teachers: native speaking instructors in charge of conversational English with cultural aspect and Korean teachers of English, the rest of the skills of the language.

Atkinson (1987) offers three reasons in his discussion of limited mother tongue use in EFL contexts as follows:

First, translation technique

It is a "learner-preferred strategy." Given the opportunity, learners will choose to translate without encouragement from the teacher though this is only true of beginner and pre-intermediate students (Harbord, 1992).

Translation/transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition even where no formal classroom learning occurs (Danchev, 1982). Learners will inevitably and even unconsciously attempt to equate a target language structure or lexical item with its closest or most common correlate in mother tongue, regardless of whether or not the teacher offers or "permits" translation. He argues therefore that methodology should attempt to work with this natural tendency rather than against it. This is not a call for extensive L1 use, as Lucas & Katz (1994) have agreed, but rather a justification for its limited use in certain situations.

Second, a humanistic approach

To let students use their mother tongue is a humanistic approach in that it permits them to say what they want. This appears a reasonable point and few teachers would refuse to help a student who asked, for example, "How do I say, *geu-nyeo-neun neomoo twinggin-da*" or "*nae chingoo-neun jagi yeoja chingoo-e-ge cha-yeot-ta?*" If students were not allowed to use any mother tongue, they

wouldn't know how to ask such questions or have courage to ask in the target language. Nevertheless, this is hardly advocating a major return to L1 use in the classroom, and most teachers would probably agree that as far as possible the students should try to explain what they want to say in English.

Third, efficient use of time

L1 strategies are efficient in terms of time spent for explanation. This is certainly the reason most commonly given by teachers who advocate L1 use in the classroom.

Explaining grammatical structures in English for beginning level students may actually shut off the interest in the language when the terminologies such as complements, auxiliary verbs, restrictive relative clauses, etc. are completely new to them. Therefore, giving instructions in English to such students may result in almost incomprehensible, unfruitful lecture.

Chambers (1992) gives five circumstances under which it might be necessary to revert to mother tongue as follows: tiredness, availability of time/level of pupil understanding, complexity of language, grammar, and disruption in class.

He notices that even some of gifted, highly motivated and committed young people (and some not so young) start to wilt, stating it is unreasonable and unfruitful to continue work in the target language when energy is running low. Explaining how to play a game, he finds that using the target language and repeating a couple of times robbed of the fun part of the game, enjoyment. Sometimes vocabulary and structures required to convey a particular message in the target language are so inaccessible to the students that mother tongue is the only practicable medium. A great deal of grammar work can be done in the target language. However, he feels using mother tongue gives a certain point of understanding. When telling a student or group of students that their behavior is unacceptable, it is so much easier to be effective in mother tongue.

However, as Atkinson (1987) points out, excessive dependency on mother tongue may ensue the following problems: 1) The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not "really" understood any item of language until it has been translated; 2) The teacher and/or the students fail to observe distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation; 3) Students speak to the teacher in mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are

quite capable of expressing what they mean; and 4) Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is crucial that they use only English.

These are the dangers that need to be well considered when mother tongue is used in the classroom. And it is up to the teacher not to lose students' motivation and/or maintain it during the class hour because motivation is the key in adult or any other language acquisition. And Atkinson (1987) argues that at early levels, a ratio of about 5 percent native language to about 95 percent target language may be more profitable.

III. METHOD OF THE STUDY

The study was done on two classes of summer program 2000 in Choong-Ang University with the control group in English only and the experimental group in written Korean on the board when explaining new vocabulary, grammar, and difficult-to-understand expressions. Then the two groups were analyzed based on the two test results.

1. Subjects

Subjects of the study were students who registered for the summer program 2000 at Chung-Ang University. The majority of them were Ansung campus students and approximately 15% were not. The total number of registered students was 206 and they had an interview with 9 native speakers of English and myself on the first day. They were also required to write a one-page long essay to decide on their level. Students were placed in 8 different levels based on their verbal communication ability and written English. The following table shows different levels and number of classes students were actually placed.

Those students being able to answer very well with basic conditional, present and past perfect tense were placed in advanced classes. Intermediate students were categorized as being able to use sentences in basic present and past continuous, modals and comparatives with good understanding and answering adequately. And beginners were the ones not being able to use proper sentence level English. All ten instructors agreed on such criteria though they might not be an absolute breakdown of the students' levels.

TABLE 1
Levels and Number of Classes

Level	Sub-level	# of classes
Beginning	Lower (-)	2
	Regular (R)	2
	Upper (+)	2
Intermediate	Lower (-)	2
	Regular (R)	1
	Upper (+)	0
Advanced	Regular (R)	1
	Upper (+)	0

Each class of approximately 20 students had four hours daily with two different instructors. The two beginning (-) classes taught by the writer. They were divided into two groups, control (Group A, morning class) and experimental group (B, afternoon class) in accordance with the results of the questionnaire given at the beginning of the course. Seventy five percent of the students in group A (morning class) preferred English only, whereas a half of the students (50%) in group B (afternoon class) wanted such class.

2. Courses

The summer program was a four hour class, five days a week for five-week session. The instructors were asked to evaluate students based on the two written tests (oral test was optional) and turn in the final grades in numbers but the course itself was a pass/fail class. The textbooks were preselected by the staff members of English department at Chung-Ang University and the instructors were notified of them a week prior to the program. There were 3 different textbooks for each level. For the beginning (-): *Interchange 2* as listening/speaking book, *Basic Reading Power* for reading/writing, and *Culturally Speaking* for culture class were chosen. It was pre-programed by a native speaking coordinator and instructors were asked to attend the meeting once a week to discuss the progress of the students, textbook materials, students' activity, exam schedule, and other relevant matters. For the study, the experimental group (B) was taught with written Korean on the board when necessary. For example, if there was a word *laryngitis* appeared

in the textbook, Korean word, gnendua, was written on the board and the meaning or definition was explained in English. On the other hand, the control group was taught only in English.

3. Procedure and Evaluation

Both groups were taught with the same textbooks and the identical tests were given. The results of the two exams and students' responses were analyzed to see if using mother tongue as written form in class had significance over English-only lecture on the beginning level students.

The first test was given upon completion of 50 hours of lecture time on the vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, cultural differences, expressions learned in the textbooks. The second one was tested in the last week of the program and graded by the writer.

Since it was pass/fail course, F was not strictly given out to students even though their academic performance was relatively poor unless students were absent for a quarter of the program.

Both groups were also studied to see if experimental group was involved in active discussion with explanation in Korean words written on the board. Students' response was studied to see if they feel written mother tongue is a good way to better understand the language.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Test Results and Class Participation

The notification of the tests was specified and two groups had the identical test on the same day. The results of the first test showed that 19 students in the experimental group (B) performed much better with the average of 90.53 points, whereas 18 students the control group's (A) average showed 81.67. It showed a significant difference in two groups' performance of language understanding. However, the underground construction with crashing sound was underway outside of the classroom of the experimental group after the first test toward the end of the program and evidently such environment affected on the performance of the students on the second test. The non- airconditioned classroom amid the unusual

heat added more irritation on the students. (The control group's classroom was equipped with an airconditioner.) Consequently, the difference in the average score on the second test was only 2.93. The following two tables show the test scores of individual students.

TABLE 2
The Test Results of 18 students in the Control Group

Initials	First Exam	Second Exam	Average Score
YSJ	82	78	80
LHS	96	80	88
KMH	82	76	79
KCH	92	92	92
LSD	98	92	95
SHS	80	62	71
PMY	95	88	92
KJY	61	78	70
CBS	94	92	93
SHJ	80	58	69
KHJ	94	78	86
LEH	80	76	78
WJH	73	72	73
YHY	58	60	59
KSE	95	N/T	95
JJH	66	N/T	66
WBY	74	N/T	74
YSK	70	N/T	70
AVERAGE	81.67	77.29	

N/T : Not taken the final exam

Here 4 students took only the first test and therefore, the average of individual student on the right hand column has not been completed.

There were some students who missed their classes in both groups toward the end of the program and they also did not take the final test. Approximately 20% of the students in each group were not enthusiastic about their study. The next table shows the results of the experimental group.

TABLE 3
The Test Results of 19 students in the Experimental Group

Initials	First Exam	Second Exam	Average Score
YYG	95	84	90
WJE	97	88	93
JJH	88	92	90
KJT	80	54	67
SWH	100	81	91
KSH	100	94	97
SEJ	99	64	82
PHJ	91	92	92
GBJ	75	64	70
IEM	100	84	92
HHC	100	60	80
YSH	56	20	38
SHY	100	84	92
YJH	88	100	94
BJK	100	76	88
GJW	90	64	77
KKW	90	N/T	90
KJT	87	N/T	87
YWI	84	N/T	84
AVERAGE	90.53	75.06	

TABLE 4
Descriptive Data for Both Groups

	Average of the First Exam	Average of the Second Exam
Control Group (A)	81.67	77.29
Experimental Group (B)	90.53	75.06

TABLE 5
t-tests for two groups on two exams

	First Exam	Second Exam
t-test	2.25	0.365
p-value	0.03	0.72

The t-tests show the results on the first exam are statistically significant ($t=2.25$, $p<0.05$). However, because the obstructive factors such as noisy construction outside and swelteringly hot classroom affected on the experimental group after the first test, the difference on the second test showed statistically not significant ($t=0.365$, $p=0.72$).

Also there were more active discussion on certain topics and their expressions and responses for study questions were more lively in the experimental group. For example, when the writer asked them if any of the students had *laryngitis* and wrote the word *혀두염* on the board, students spoke of their experiences and the symptoms of it describing how painful it was. Moreover, they sympathized with the writer upon her terrible experience caused by the infection and asked further related questions. Thereby, the rapport between the teacher and the students was vividly noticeable.

On the other hand, the students in the control group were less active in giving responses. When the same question was asked, most of them shyly looked at the instructor or timidly expected other students to say something. Explaining a medical terminology to the beginning level students was not an easy task at all. It took more time and yet students' comprehension was not clear. It was noted that some of them even drifted away from the study group but physically remained in the seat and scribble on their notebooks. This phenomenon usually happened when they did not understand the question because of certain vocabulary. They just sat in the classroom, apparently lost interest to learn or ask any questions. Some asked their peers for the meaning. And some students flipped through the textbook as if they wanted to see any clues in the book as noted in the previous study (Lee, 1997).

2. Students' Response

According to the results of the questionnaire, most students (68%) felt explaining

with written mother tongue was a good method to help them understand the content of the study and they also answered it would be effective if a native speaking instructor used even a minimum level of Korean to explain grammar or vocabulary. If they learn in an English-only class, they would try to think in the language harder but their comprehension would not be completely clear. Obviously, they understand better in mother tongue and therefore, learn more and faster from it than English-only class. It was learned that students do not ask questions on the incomprehensible materials but pretend they understood, or ask their peers during or after the class or just pass up the opportunity to learn. These responses supported their behavior in class.

Almost all the students (94% in control group, 95% in experimental group) looked forward to taking the course as it was known to be interesting program with parties like international day and students' performance day.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of the learners' first language in written form in English classroom based on a research done on the students who registered for the summer English program at Chung-Ang University during the summer of 2000. To begin with the study, the writer did not believe in all-or-nothing approach. Moreover, the writer opposes teaching English in Korean but at the same time she also believes using English-only won't be as effective as we expected from the native speaking instructions especially for beginning level students. And allowing to speak the learners' mother tongue often makes them use it all throughout the entire English classroom. According to this study, it was noted that the group taught English using written form of mother tongue performed better on the exam and got involved in active class discussion. It encourages students to acquire the language positively. But here lies an important concept of limited usage. If mother tongue is casually used in the language classroom, students get less motivated and start using mother tongue even though they can express their ideas in the target language. Therefore, teacher's discretion is greatly needed in using mother tongue to maximize the students' learning process.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire given at the beginning

1. How many years have you been studying English?
a. 6 years b. 7 years c. 8 years d. 9 years e. over 10 years
2. How many hours a week have you been studying English?
a. less than 3 hours b. 3-5 hours c. 5-7 hours d. 7-9 hours e. over 10 hours
3. What area of the language have you been studying? Select more than 1 if necessary.
a. grammar b. reading c. listening d. conversation e. others
4. Is English an interesting subject?
a. yes b. no c. interesting but I don't like it.
5. What is the most difficult part of English?
a. speaking b. listening c. reading d. writing e. grammar
6. If listening is difficult for you, what factor causes difficulty?
a. pronunciation b. word contraction c. vocabulary d. cultural differences
7. How much money have you spent on English learning at an institute or tutoring since middle school?
a. less than a million won b. 1-5 million won
c. 5-10 million won d. 10-15 million won
e. others
8. Why did you feel it was necessary to get tutoring or extra help from outside of school?
a. I was behind the subject.
b. Just because other friends do.
c. out of pressure.
d. English education at school was not enough.
e. Teachers at school didn't pay attention to my progress.
9. Did you have an English teacher who spoke English only in the class?
a. yes b. no
10. Do you prefer English only class?
a. yes b. no
11. If yes, why?
12. If no, why not?
13. What is your grade average in English?
a. A(90-100) b. B(80-89) c. C(70-79) d. D(60-69) e. below 60
14. What is your SAT (수능) score in English?
15. Is summer program something you look forward to?
a. yes b. no
16. Is a good command of English a plus for your future career?
a. yes b. no
17. What do you want to be after graduation?
18. What do you want to get out of this English class?

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire given at the end

1. Do you understand foreign instructor's grammar and new vocabulary explanation?
a. yes, very well b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
2. Is it a good method to have Korean explanation written on the board for difficult grammar or new word?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
3. Is it effective to learn from a foreign instructor who can explain in Korean?
a. very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
4. Reasons for question 3?
5. What are merits of learning English from a foreigner who can't speak Korean?
6. Any demerits?
7. What was your goal in the class?
8. Did you accomplish your goal?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
9. Is this summer program you would like to take again?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
10. Was heat a minus factor to your study?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
11. Did you put an effort energetically compared with regular semester?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
12. Is pair work discussion natural and interesting to you?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
13. Is pair work discussion helpful to your English study?
a. yes, very much b. yes c. so-so d. no e. not at all
14. What are merits of having summer program?
15. What do you do when you don't understand the instructor?
16. What part of the instructor was helpful to you?
17. What was not?
18. What was the most interesting part of the summer program?

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