

Effects of English Programs in the Workplace on Employees' English Learning: A Case Study on In-Company English Programs in Korea

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기업 내 영어 교육이 직장인의 영어 학습에 미치는 영향: 국내 대기업의 사내 영어 교육 프로그램 사례 연구

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Abstract This study examines the effects of in-company English programs on Korean employees' English learning. During the twelve weeks, 68 employees in Korea engaged in an English learning program in the workplace. Before and after the program, pre- and post-tests were conducted to see if their English proficiency improved. Pre- and post-surveys and interviews were also administered to understand how they perceived the program. Results show that the employees improved their English oral proficiency and their attitudes toward English learning positively changed, as a result of participating in the program. Also, the program appeared to be successful, meeting their needs. Given that little research has investigated the effects of in-company English learning, this study provides insights on the effectiveness of English programs in the workplace in Korea.

Key Words : English language learning, English language learning programs in the workplace, In-company English language classes, English speaking, English oral proficiency

요 약 본 연구는 사내 영어 교육이 직장인의 영어 말하기 능력 향상에 미치는 영향을 조사한 것으로, 교육을 통해 참가자의 영어 말하기 능력이 실제로 상승하는지에 대한 여부와 사내 영어 교육에 대한 참가자의 인식을 파악하는 데 그 목적이 있다. 국내 대기업 종사자 68명이 12주 동안 사내 영어 교육 프로그램에 참가하였으며, 참가자 전원 모두 교육 시작 전과 종료 후 두 차례에 걸쳐 사전 사후 말하기 평가 및 설문에 참여하였다. 연구의 주요 결과 및 시사점을 살펴보면, 교육 참가자의 영어 말하기 능력은 교육 전에 비해 교육 종료 후 대체로 상승하였고, 참가자 대부분이 사내 영어 교육 프로그램에 대해 영어 능력을 향상시킬 수 있는 효과적인 프로그램이라고 긍정적으로 인식하고 있음을 알 수 있었다. 최근 기업 내 영어 교육 프로그램이 증가하는데 비해 그에 대한 실증적인 연구가 부족하다는 점을 고려해 볼 때, 본 연구가 갖는 시사점은 크다고 할 수 있다.

주제어 : 영어 교육, 기업 내 영어 교육 프로그램, 사내 영어 교육, 영어 말하기, 영어 말하기 능숙도

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1. Introduction

It is obvious that English is the language for global business. As growing attention has been drawn to English speaking, English oral proficiency has been an influential factor at work. In order to communicate with foreigners in work places, most job applicants in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings have been required to submit their oral proficiency test score to prove that they have adequate English proficiency [1]. Furthermore, a large number of companies have also come to assess their employees' English oral proficiency via commercialized tests [2].

Since it has come to this, companies in EFL contexts have accepted this reality that English language learning in the workplace has become a part of the training strategy of their human resource teams. Most training courses have intended to give their employees opportunities to practice English, focusing on language used for global business. Corporations in Hong Kong have promoted English learning in the workplace, as well as in mainland China, English communication activities in the workplace have been organized to create English learning atmosphere and encouraged their employees to practice English after work [3]. Likewise, In Korea, a number of companies have also provided their employees with English speaking classes as one of the HRD (Human Resources Department) education and training programs [4].

Considering this, it is necessary to investigate how companies provide English language learning programs for their employees and whether these training courses are effective. However, little research has empirically investigated these programs in the workplace [5], and only a few findings have been reported related to the workplace English language learning [6]. That is, the effectiveness of in-company English language learning programs has not been proven [3]. Furthermore, based on the needs analysis on the uses of English for the workplace, English learning programs in the workplace

should be updated, in line with employers' needs [7]. However, whether the programs have met the needs of employees has remained unclear.

Previous studies on the effects of training programs in the workplace have revealed that the program design is highly inefficient and at odds with the requirements of employees [8]. Even though employees show strong motivation for language learning in the workplace, little consideration of the distinctiveness of workplace English learning has been given [9]. In the dearth of empirical studies investigating the workplace language learning, therefore, the present study aims to explore the effectiveness of English learning programs in the workplace. Research questions are as follow:

1. What are the effects of English learning programs in the workplace on Korean employees' oral proficiency?
2. What are the impacts of English learning programs in the workplace on Korean employees' attitude toward English language learning?
3. What are Korean employees perspectives toward English learning programs in the workplace?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants in the current study were chosen based on purposeful sampling, according to [10]. The participants consisted of 47 male and 21 female employees in Korea, aged 24-63. The number of years working for their company ranged from 1 to 17. They were taking an English speaking class in the workplace in Korea because they were required to submit their English oral proficiency test score to get promoted.

2.2 In-Company English Learning Program

The participants took the English speaking class for four hours a week in preparation for oral proficiency

tests. Although there were three speaking classes at different times, only one instructor was in charge of the whole program, so that other possible variables were able to be controlled by the same teacher.

The contents of the class were mostly about describing daily life styles in English. The participants have practiced asking and answering the questions related to their everyday life such as family, friends, jobs, and hobbies, based on the OPIc test. After learning some useful English expressions from the instructor, they were paired up and given the opportunity to practice speaking with their partner.

2.3 Research Procedures

The focus of the current research was to ascertain whether English learning programs in the workplace had a notable effect on Korean employees' oral proficiency. Also, this study investigated whether there were any changes in their attitudes toward English language learning and how they perceived the program. This study used a mixed-method, By incorporating quantitative and qualitative research methods, it had potential to reduce the biases inherent in one method while enhancing the validity of inquiry [11].

The experiment was carried out for twelve weeks. During the experiment, they received English speaking training for four hours a week. Pre- and post-tests were conducted before and after the program began and ended to see if the participants' oral proficiency actually improved. There were 12 to 15 tasks for both pre- and post-tests on the basis of OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) tests. The participants spent 10 to 15 minutes to complete the tasks. They recorded their oral performance using a recording function with their smart phone. After that, they converted their recorded performance into digital sound files, then submitted to the researcher of the current study.

The collected data were evaluated by two native English speakers in charge of marking scores of simulated OPIs test in Korea. They evaluated the

participants' responses based on ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 [12]. All the variance factors to influence the test results in the process of making the pre- and post-tests were controlled by the same native speakers. An inter-rater coefficient was .98.

This study also conducted structured questionnaire-based surveys to understand the participants' attitudes toward English language learning. There were thirty-nine questionnaires for the pre- and post-surveys, respectively. The questionnaires were about their belief, interest, and confidence, related to English learning and measured as 5-point Likert scales.

After the post-survey, a focus group interview was conducted in an attempt to learn about the participants' more detailed experience on the language learning program. Ten interviewees were randomly selected among the participants, and the interview took 30 minutes in total.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data from the current study were analyzed using SPSS version 18.0. As for the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated. Paired samples t-tests were performed to see if there were any mean differences between pre- and post-tests. For the questionnaires, another descriptive statistics and paired t-tests were administered to investigate whether there were any changes in attitudes towards English language learning. Significance level was set at .05.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a content analysis method in order to provide deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study [13].

3. Results

3.1 Oral Proficiency Improvement

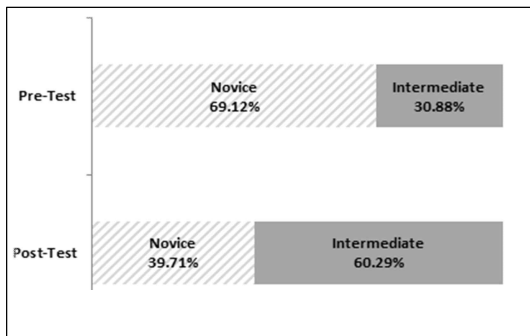
To investigate the participants' oral proficiency improvement, there were pre- and post-tests. Two native speakers professional for rating OPI tests

evaluated their recorded performance according to ACTFL Guidelines 2012 [12]. The proficiency levels were classified into nine levels: ranging from Level 1 (Novice Low) to Level 9 (Advanced High). The descriptive statistics as well as paired samples t-test results are presented in <Table 1>.

<Table 1> Changes in Oral Proficiency Level

Pre-Test (n=68)		Post-Test (n=68)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
3.00	0.90	3.63	1.08	9.140	.000

Findings, as shown in Table 1, revealed statistically significant mean differences between the pre- and post-tests ($t = 9.140$, $p = .000$), indicating the participants' oral proficiency improvement, to be an outcome of participating in the English program in the workplace. To be specific, the mean proficiency level on the pre-test was 3.00 while 3.63 on the post-test. Although the mean proficiency levels on pre- and post-tests can both be regarded as Novice-High (Level 3), this result indicates that the participants improved their English oral proficiency given that most participants who engaged in this study were Novice on the pre-test while those were Intermediate on the post-test, as seen from [Fig. 1].



At the start of the study, 47 participants out of 68 (69.12%) were Novice. However, only 27 out of 68 (39.71%) still remained Novice at the end of the study. This demonstrates the participants' oral proficiency improvement as an effect of the in-company English learning program. Considering that there has been little research investigating how effective language learning programs are in the workplace in Korea [4], the present study provides valuable insights on the effectiveness of in-company language learning programs in Korea.

3.2 Attitudes toward English Language Learning

One of the purposes of the current study was to understand if there were any changes in participants' attitudes toward English language learning. Pre- and post-surveys were given to all participants before and after the actual experiment. Results of the present study were positively observed overall. The descriptive statistics as well as paired-samples t-test results are presented in <Table 2>.

<Table 2> Changes in Attitudes

	Pre-Survey (n=68)		Post-Survey (n=68)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Belief	1.82	0.73	2.34	0.77	6.453	.000
Interest	3.04	1.03	3.76	0.79	6.518	.000
Confidence	2.07	0.90	2.65	0.88	6.396	.000

Results indicate that the in-company English learning program was effective in increasing the participants' belief in English proficiency improvement. As seen from <Table 2>, there were significant mean differences between pre- and post-surveys ($p = .000$). To be more specific, the mean score on the pre-survey was 1.82, while it was 2.34 on the post-survey. That is, they believed English learning programs in the workplace would improve their English oral proficiency.

There were also statistically significant mean

differences between pre- and post-surveys in terms of interest in English language learning ($p = .000$). Specifically, the mean score on the pre-test was 3.04, while it was 3.76 on the post-test. Findings show that the participants enhanced their interest in English speaking to be an outcome of engaging in the English learning program in the workplace.

When it comes to confidence, there were also significant mean differences between pre- and post-surveys ($p = .000$). To be more specific, the mean score on the pre-test was 2.07, whereas it was 2.65 on the post-test. That is, the participants developed their confidence in speaking English language as an effect of the in-company English language learning program.

Overall, findings of the current study suggest that the English learning program in the workplace made beneficial and positive effects on the employees' attitudes toward English language learning. The results indicate that the program was effective in increasing their belief in oral proficiency improvement, enhancing their interest in English speaking, and boosting their confidence when they speak in English.

Learners' affective factors are crucial factors affecting foreign language development because negative attitudes hinder the language learners' learning process [14]. In this realm, this study proved that English learning programs in the workplace are beneficial to Korean employees, changing their attitudes toward English language learning positively.

3.3 Perspectives toward English Language Learning Programs in the Workplace

To investigate how Korean employees perceive the English language learning program in the workplace, a focus-group interview was performed. Since their English oral proficiency test score was reflected in their promotions and performance records, all participants in the present study were required to submit their oral proficiency test score from OPIc test.

As reported in the previous study [15], the

participants understood that oral proficiency tests such as OPIc are needed and believed that the OPIc test is more valid than other language tests. As the program focused on the OPIc test to meet the needs of the employees, the participants perceived the English language learning program in the workplace was conducted successfully, meeting their requirements.

I'm really satisfied with the program. I needed to improve my English oral proficiency, and the workplace language learning program really helped me out. I got what I wanted. I recommend this program to my colleagues. - Huh (male, 31)

Honestly, I didn't expect much at first. However, now I got my test scores, and I'm so happy with that. Most of all, I liked the fact that I joined the class every week in the workplace without having to go to other language institutes. I was able to save my time and money. I think that's what all employees need. - Lee (female, 27)

English language training programs should provide adequate facilities and quality and accommodating programs that fulfill the employees' requirement [7]. In the present study, the participants believed that the program is effective because they could improve their English proficiency in a time- and cost-efficient way. In this realm, the in-company English language learning program in the current study made beneficial impacts on Korean employees' language learning, meeting their needs.

4. Conclusion

The present study examined the English learning program in the workplace in Korea. Major findings are as follows: First, English oral proficiency levels of the employees improved as a result of participating in the

workplace language learning program. Most of the employees were Novice at the start of the study, while those were Intermediate at the end of the study. Second, the language learning program in the workplace helped the employees have more interests and confidence in English language learning. Additionally, they believed their oral proficiency level would improve through the program, which is very important for foreign language acquisition [14]. Lastly, the English language learning program in the workplace has been conducted successfully, meeting the employees' needs. That is, the program in this study fulfilled their requirement and led to successful language learning experience.

Foreign language learning is becoming more and more important [16, 17, 18, 19]. Findings of the current study make a stark difference from the previous studies, in that this study is based on a substantial research that makes an analysis of current employees taking English speaking classes in the workplace in EFL settings. Given that the effectiveness of English learning programs in the workplace has not been proven [3], this study shows insights into the effectiveness of in-company language learning programs in Korea. In addition, considering that previous training programs in the workplace have been at odds with the employees' needs [8], the present study shed light on the fact that the English learning programs in the workplace in Korea could meet the requirements of the employees. Furthermore, the current study proved that English learning programs in the workplace positively can change the employees' attitudes toward English learning, which is crucial and beneficial in foreign language learning [14].

There are some limitations and suggestions for the future research. First, because the experimental group involved in the English learning program featured only 68 employees in a major company in Korea, this case study is limited by its small size and lack of generalizability. Second, although the current study

adopted a pretest-treatment-posttest structure, there was no control group. Considering that the use of control group makes it easier to avoid certain threats to validity [20], the future study should include the control group. Finally, learner variables such as language learning aptitude or learning styles might have affected the employees' oral proficiency, and therefore, it should be accounted for in future studies.

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