

Groping for a new English teaching strategy[☆]

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Abstract

By the time a student reaches college, he or she has studied English for approximately ten years. As if that were not sufficient, English education continues for up to two additional years in college. The outcome of these years of arduous toil produces results that are far below expectations. Hence, English falls among students' most loathed subjects. The clear villain for this paltry progress is not the students but a victimising system. From the first year of junior high school through the freshman or sophomore years of college, English is monotonously taught with almost no variation whatsoever. The curriculum consists mostly of grammar and translation, in that order. Many teachers force rote memorisation of grammar on hapless kids while not even realising the proper methods of language acquisition. Because English in Korea begins in earnest in junior high school, pupils should first be exposed to spoken English, with an emphasis on listening and speaking, duly followed by reading and writing. More specifically, only after reviewing systematic structure and syntax should college students focus on reading and writing.

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Introduction

Korea's first English teaching institute, the *Dongmunhak* School, was founded in 1883 to train government interpreters and translators. Since then, English literacy has climbed with Koreans' interest in the language. The purposes of learning the “world language” and attitudes and behaviours toward these

efforts vary among individuals and groups. The camps of English pedagogy in Korea are largely divided among writing versus speaking and refinement versus practicality.

Typically, Koreans study English in public schools and private academies for over ten years. English-language mass culture bombards them. Regrettably, many still cannot converse with foreigners or write letters in English. The push for more practical English derives from this sobering truth. However, given the heavy emphasis on pattern practice, the adage that “speaking makes us blind, while writing makes us deaf” suggests that Korean English students go blind first. The ideal of learning other languages is to gain knowledge through foreign books. Imagine learning

[☆] This paper is based upon KSATs and collegiate interpretational education that I, the writer, have directly experienced for over 30 years. Thus, it aims to provide practical guidance for English education.

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Chinese through conversation, instead of books. We could “interpret” Chinese without ever encountering the ideas, literature, or philosophy of the “Middle Kingdom.” Moreover, foreign language education inevitably lags behind developments in mass communications.

I believe that language education must focus on the written word. Meeting other peoples in their own language matters less than reading their best ideas. English education must focus on “how” and “what”; *i.e.*, HOW to use audio-lingual and meaning-oriented methods, and HOW to teach real writing and communicative skills for self-expression, with WHAT curriculum and WHAT textbooks?

Values

Self-reflection in college English education is urgent. We are bewildered, with no easy answers in sight. The fundamental issue itself requires reanalysis. College English is a basic requirement for most majors with the goal of students grasping world cultures through language and improving on middle and high school basic learning. However, we must refine our aims to achieve them. Undoubtedly, English contributes practically and culturally to education. However, should basic college English requirements stress practicality or cultural literacy? Of course, these values overlap; good teaching is both practical and cultural. The real problem is that the potential for new methods is curtailed before students even set foot on college campuses.

With limitless time and money, we could teach the four key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In practice, these are only intentions. We tilt toward written English at the expense of spoken English, while glossing over practicality. Practical uses, such as listening to lectures in the language, communicating comfortably with foreigners, and holding academic discussions, sound reasonable but stray far from reality.

In contrast, cultural education interprets other civilisations to widen areas of study. To bestow culture, English requires content, which no language exists apart from. Colleges know that students learn English pattern drills in middle and high school, and students' interests have diverged and fluctuated along the way. To present deeper contents requires sentences with drawn out explanations of American and British mannerisms which preclude one-track language skills and neglect practical value. However, if readings present complex contents that tax comprehension, cultural enrichment is further lost.

Practical English ability smoothly fills the needs of national defence, industry, academia, etc., while cultural knowledge directly broadens views and spirituality through the major texts of all times and nations. Practical training might sharpen mental acuity, which helps in mathematics, philosophy, logic, and other subjects. However, curricula that neglect cultural education leave us with mere vocational training, diluting the meaning of a university education. In one recent class, for example, no student had ever heard of Napoleon. Indeed, the students seemed to know almost no Korean history either, at least in English. Bequeathing culture, a civilising force, is the university's *raison d'être*. Most true professional education occurs during the career itself. The cultural enlightenment obtained in college is timeless and priceless.

Indiana University's Professor Parker stated, “If cultural education, for example, is not only to reach out for new knowledge but also to broaden and train one's mind, training one's mind is mainly by speech/language training.” While foreign language education might not increase inherent intelligence, knowing other languages expands one's scope of learning. Even our mother tongue can then be observed more objectively and used more accurately. To read, write, listen, or speak only one language limits a person's vision and marks one as less educated. Although one might comprehend other cultures through music or other art and materials that have been interpreted or translated into Korean, he or she is still denied the cultural richness that language alone expresses. Exploring other cultures only indirectly must necessarily be shallow.

To know another language is to partake of another culture authentically. Imagine two people who seek to know Korea. One enjoys great knowledge of the “Land of the Morning Calm” but speaks no Korean. The other has not studied our history or culture but speaks Korean well. With which of these people could we truly grow closer, and which is most empowered to comprehend contemporary Korea? To be locked in a foreign language keeps us foreign. This phenomenon might be why some worry that foreign language education harms our national spirit. However, the objective of English education in college is to broaden us through participation in another culture.

The practical nature of English remains. Clearly, we choose this language over others due to its widespread impact. Despite the focus on the cultural heights of English, its utility is not lost. Indeed, teaching English-speaking culture without advancing practical ability would be problematic. Not knowing which field students will work in after graduation argues against

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