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Implementing Communicative Language Teaching in
Korean Schools: Teachers' challenges

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1.Introduction

During the past decade English education has been changing in Korea (Jeon, 2009). The government's focus has been to push for a more communicative approach in the teaching of English, as South Korea's economic growth began to make a more globalised impact (Littlewood, 2007,Jeon, 2009, Kwon, 2009, Dailey, 2010). In order to foster a greater proficiency in English among its population, the government has adapted the existing curricula, and placed a greater focus on communicative approaches to learning English (Littlewood, 2007, Butler, 2011).

This stronger focus on communicative language teaching has included more in-service training for teachers, as well as encouraging universities to move away from their grammar-based entrance exams (Jo, 2004, Jeon, 2009). This move to a more communicative approach to language education (CLT) has not been without resistance and this has had a negative effect on teachers' perceptions of English teaching (Li, 1998, Jo, 2008, Butler, 2011).

This paper will look at the factors that have influenced teacher education in the communicative approach in the South Korean context. Some educational reforms that have taken place in the country and how these affect teaching methods will also be discussed. Finally, the author of this assignment will also focus on the attitudes of the teachers, and the socio-institutional constraints that have had an effect on English education and teacher education in South Korea.

The author has been involved in in-service training programs for elementary as well as secondary public school teachers in Korea. Through these programs, it became evident that there is a discrepancy between the government's educational policy and the ground-level implementation of a more communicative approach to language learning. This paper will explore these discrepancies, and look at ways in which these can be overcome.

The question of the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as implemented in a Korean context, and the effect that the Korean educational environment has on teaching English for Korean teachers, will be discussed.

2. English education in South Korea

Traditionally education in Korea, as in much of the rest of Asia, is based in Confucian constructs (Butler, 2011). This means that the focus of education has been viewed as literary education, in which a teacher, being the bearer of knowledge, transfers the knowledge to his students. Practical knowledge and implementation was not regarded as useful (Butler, 2011).

With this in mind, English has been taught in much the same way. The Grammar-Translation Method has been favoured in Korea for many years (Littlewood, 2007, Butler, 2011). Since 1997 the Korean government has been emphasising a more communicative approach to English language teaching and learning (Jo, 2008, Jeon, 2009, Dailey, 2010). The communicative approach is based on the principle that language teaching should lead to meaningful communication (Butler, 2011).

Unfortunately, it is a fact that although the government has attempted to make language learning more communicative through the implementation of new curricula, it has not changed the practices of Grammar-Translation or Audio-Lingual methods of teaching. Reasons for this is primarily the wash-back effect of the exam-based culture and the perceived lack of proficiency in English of the Korean teachers (Johson, 2005, Shin, 2012).

3. Communicative Language Teaching in Korea

Becoming a teacher in Korea is a very competitive and highly strenuous exercise. For elementary and secondary school teachers, becoming a teacher means attending specific educational universities, or teacher colleges (Jo, 2008). After graduation, an extra teacher qualification exam needs to be taken. A graduate-level student of elementary education can also qualify as an elementary school teacher without taking the teachers' exam, provided that they major in elementary education. If not, they will not have the required credits to apply for the exam (Jo, 2008:377). For secondary school teachers, the minimum qualification is a degree in education, or to have a MA degree. Depending on the amount of credits, teachers may be exempted from the national teachers' exam, if they have obtained 42 credits, related to the student's major (Jo, 2008). After this process, the local educational ministries invite teachers to work in their districts. Teachers are

selected through open competition in each district which is controlled by the selection committee according to strict criteria (Jo, 2008). The selection criteria are extremely stringent, and the competition is such that there can be 20 teachers competing for a single position. Other factors that may influence selection for a teaching position may be age, as well as English proficiency (Jo, 2008:378).

In this competitive environment, being a fairly competent English teacher is an added advantage. The government's aim of implementing communicative teaching favours teachers that have international education, or who have majored in English or English education. However, communicative teaching is not taking place as wide spread as the government would like to see.

Although English teacher training in Korea has taken steps forward since 1997, teachers are still struggling to teach English in communicative ways. At elementary school level, teachers are not specifically trained as English teachers. English is only one of the subjects that homeroom teachers teach (Butler, 2004). Therefore, an elementary school teacher does not have to be an English major student to be a teacher of English, as would be the case in secondary schools in the Korean educational system. To counter this lack of proficiency, the government has instituted 120 hour induction programs for communicative language teaching for elementary school teachers (Butler, 2004). This, of course, is not enough to help teachers gain CLT competence in a system that does not readily believe in communicative teaching as an effective method of language learning.

In his 2004 paper, Butler found that in Seoul,

One media report indicated that out of 9,768 English teachers in Seoul at levels ranging from elementary to high school, only 7.9% had a command of English sufficient to teach using English only. (Butler, 2004:247).

This level of English proficiency among teachers is worrying, as the quality of English learning that takes place comes into question. This lack of proficiency among Korean teachers of English is one reason that teachers prefer to teach in traditional ways. Other reasons for a lack of CLT in Korea are, what this paper calls, conceptual constraints,

classroom constraints, and societal-institutional constraints and this will be discussed below.

3.1. Conceptual constraints

In Korea, as in many Asian countries, teachers have viewed CLT only as a speaking-focused teaching method with too little emphasis on grammar and language structures (Littlewood, 2007, Dailey, 2010). Of course CLT views grammar as an integral aspect of effective communication. These misconceptions stem from the fact that teachers have not received sufficient training in CLT, nor have they themselves learnt through CLT. Most English teachers in Korea have been taught English in the old traditional, Grammar-Translation Method (Jeon, 2009). Jeon (2009:124) goes on to say:

Teachers may have been exposed to the concept theoretically while participating in pre-service teacher training programs or in-service training programs, however, they have not had many opportunities to observe the practice in actual classrooms.

The fact that teachers have not experienced CLT in practice or only had limited exposure to CLT, has led to the misconception that CLT is language oriented, as most practice teaching in such training programs are often speaking focused.

This misconception about what CLT is, has led to a confusion in terms of classroom management (Littlewood, 2007). Teachers in CLT classrooms that are viewed as speaking-focused, report that teachers are unsure of how to handle tasks that focus on students talking to each other (Littlewood, 2007). Teachers often feel that they lose control of their students and that the noise level becomes too much to manage, especially if students keep on communicating in their mother tongue (Littlewood, 2007).

3.2. Classroom Constraints

The classroom situation in Korean schools does not always lend itself to effective implementation of CLT. Teachers often report class sizes of over 40 students per class, and this leads to a perceived inability for teachers to effectively manage the students (Li, 1998).

Teachers often still complain about class sizes and in the case of elementary school teachers, their role is not only one of language educator, but also of homeroom teacher

(Shin, 2012). In this case, a great deal of the teachers' time is taken up by administrative duties such as parent meetings and student counselling (Shin, 2012). Many teachers feel underprepared for the role of counsellor, as they have not been trained in counselling strategies and are often not prepared or equipped to handle the needs of the students. All these extra duties leads to the fact that very little attention is given to the implementation of CLT.

Further classroom constraints would also include the need to ensure that all the teachers are covering the same material, so that a standardised test can be developed for all the classes. The test-based nature of the Korean school system is discussed at a later point in this paper, seeing that it does have a major impact on the proper implementation of CLT in Korean schools.

3.3. Societal-institutional Constraints

The final aspect that this section will address is what Butler (2011) calls societal-institutional constraints. These are the aspects of language teaching and learning that the teacher cannot control. In Korea this is reflected by the expectations of the school, students and parents. Korean schools often aim for high academic achievements from their students, as this aids the promotion of the school's standing in the community, as well as securing more funds from the government (Kwon, 2009).

The strong focus on the grammar-based university entry exam is another reason why teachers struggle to implement CLT in schools. Most students see English as just another subject that needs to be passed in order to obtain a good grade, so that they can apply for the universities of their choice (Jeon, 2009). Students expect their teachers to cover the work in such a way that they will be able to do well when write the exams (Jeon, 2009, Kim, 2011), and a teacher's competence is evaluated by his students' achievements during the entry exams (Jeon, 2009).

The school culture plays an important part in the acceptance or rejection of CLT in practice. In a culture where independence is not always looked upon favourably, the pressure to conform to the 'traditional' method of teaching is immense (Shin, 2012). Novice teachers are 'encouraged' not to step out of line, or reminded that the theory that

was learned in their educational colleges, is much different to the reality of teaching, as explained by one novice teacher that was interviewed by Shin (2012:554) :

When I first met with the principal, I was told that college and the actual classroom are different, and I needed to adjust to the realities fast, by following the more experienced teachers' example. One of the negative scenarios mentioned was teaching in English. (Critical incident, Yoon)

This lack of support causes teachers to abandon the use of CLT in their classrooms. Teachers report that often no help is offered to them by school administrators or more senior teachers, because the focus is on tests and exam results (Li, 1998, Shin, 2012). The lack of support and the exam-based culture of the Korean education system create a challenge for teachers who want to implement more communicative methods in their classrooms. The disparity between the government's ideals and these unfortunate practices in the local school environment needs to be addressed.

4. Suggestions for better teacher support and education

One of the biggest challenges that faces teachers who attempt to implement CLT in their classes, is the lack of support by the local administrators. In order to achieve this, there should be a stronger emphasis on introducing this communicative approach and its benefits to the rank and file of educators and school administrators (Li, 1998).

4.1 The socialization of novice teachers

Currently, novice teachers are hesitant to bring about change in their schools. To be recognized as competent teachers, their practices should reflect those of the rest of the teaching body (Shin, 2012). This happens very early in a teacher's career, and teachers are often disciplined or looked down upon if they do not conform to the way things have been done traditionally (Shin, 2012). For an existing group, in this case a teaching body, to accept any suggestions of changes in the implementation of how things have always been done, is no easy thing. Such change has been gradually taking place in the Korean schools, with the implementation of programs like EPIK (English Program In Korea) and

TALK (Teach and Learn in Korea) because there has been an increase of native-speaking teachers in public schools to assist in English language learning (Shin, 2012). The challenge for schools is to accept that the new methods of language teaching that the novice teachers are learning at university and through other training courses, are far more effective in acquiring English at a communicative level.

4.2. Grammar based testing

The grammar-based English testing that exists in the Korean system at the moment negates the communicative training programmes for teachers and inhibits the implementation of the CLT method of language learning. Teachers see their roles not so much as language educators, but rather as a conduit for students to be as well prepared for the exams as possible (Li, 1998, Shin, 2012).

The grammar-based testing system increases the work load for teachers, who need to be grammatically knowledgeable, and causes lessons to be less student-oriented, but more teacher orientated as it resorts to traditional lecture-style teaching that is common in grammar-translation or audio-lingual language teaching (Shin, 2012). The school structure therefore leaves no room for teachers to try to implement a CLT lesson, as the communicative nature of such a class will detract from the explicit grammatical knowledge that the students will be required to know for testing purposes.

The KSAT has started to move away from a grammar-focused English exam to a more communicative one, but some of the big universities have implemented their own English tests for prospective students that still focus on their grammatical knowledge only (Kwon, 2009). Clearly, a new standard of English tests need to be established so that the same expectations can be given to teachers, students and parents.

4.3. Expectations of teachers and school cultures

The societal pressure from both students and parents puts stress on teachers to teach English in a way that is measurable and prepares students for exams (Li, 1998, Shin, 2012). Teachers often see their role not as facilitators of learning but rather as preparing the students for their exams (Li, 1998). Parents also expect teachers to provide their children with the required knowledge in order to pass their exams (Kwon, 2009).

Additional training in CLT for teachers is not necessarily a solution to the problem, as these programs exist, particularly for novice teachers and the results have not been overly effective. The biggest change in perception needs to be established at an educational and ideological level, where the processes and cultures of English education can be reviewed and adapted. The question whether CLT is applicable in an Asian environment (Li, 1998, Butler, 2011), is one that unlocks a wide range of views and opinions. Alternatives, or derivatives of CLT such as Task-Based Learning (TBL) is an option that is becoming more popular in Asian settings, but is still not viewed without resistance (Butler, 2011).

5. The way forward?

The merit of CLT and also TBL in an Asian context is one that needs to be further examined. Another school of thought suggests that perhaps English education has moved beyond any specific 'method' in English teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This school of thought suggests that the concept of any specific method in English education is in essence a means for an English-speaking person to exercise a form of control over other cultures (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This is demonstrated through English teaching methods, by marginalising the culture in which English is being taught. As Kumaravadivelu (2003:541) explains:

What gives the concept of method its colonial coloration? More than anything else, the concept of method is a construct of marginality. It valorizes everything with the colonial Self and marginalizes everything associated with the subaltern Other. In the neo-colonial present, as in the colonial past, methods are used to establish the native Self as superior and the non-native Other as inferior.

This disregard for the native culture and local 'methods' has had a negative effect on language teaching, as we have seen in Korea. The popularity of programs like TALK and EPIK are the results of 'self-marginalisation' (Kumaravadivelu, 2003:548), because native speakers are preferred over local teachers to teach English. The native teachers are preferred simply because they speak 'real' English and therefore represent the ideal to which students, and teacher training institutions strive, regardless whether the native

speakers have educational backgrounds or experience in foreign language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

To attempt to change an education method may not be the solution to the marginalisation of local constructs, but rather, as Kumaravadivelu (2003:544) says, an “alternative to method” should be found. This alternative should be a way for local teachers to teach English in such a way to best benefit their learners. They should be able to develop a pedagogy that they understand best and will lead to more effective learning. This may mean that both the curriculum, exam systems and teaching practices should be adapted to suit the Korean context in the best way. The way forward would have to acknowledge the cultural attributes to learning instead of simply applying a ‘method’ and expecting it to be accepted and effective in any given context.

6. Conclusion

This paper looked at the difficulty that teachers experience in their efforts to implement CLT in a Korean context. The challenges that Korean teachers have to overcome are many, from the socio-political obstacles to the challenges that the schools themselves cause. The current traditional system of English language teaching will have to adapt if Korea truly wants to become a country that is proficient in English.

Changes that have to be implemented are bigger support structures for novice teachers who want to implement CLT (Shin, 2012); and regular education sessions for both teachers and parents that will allow for a better understanding of why a methodology of communicative practice is one that will better suit the needs of the students. Another change that should be brought about, is an improvement in the English proficiency of the teachers, and also better training in CLT for the teachers who are already in service. While these training sessions do exist, Korean teachers for the most part, do not understand what benefits CLT can truly have as a method of English teaching (Li, 1998, Shin, 2012).

The author endeavoured to show that miscommunication between government ideals and actual teaching practices in Korean schools do exist, and these need to be addressed if teachers are to implement the skills they have gained in training institutions and colleges. The question of whether CLT is the best fit for the Asian educational system

is one that has been well debated (Butler, 2011). The alternatives of content-based education or TBL are avenues that are also needed to be explored by the Korean teachers. However, these can only be truly explored if the educational fraternity supports a new approach to language learning. Teachers should be given an amount of freedom to implement language teaching through new methods. Whether this will happen in South Korea in the near future, remains to be seen. There is hope that the spirit of conformity in Korea will change, and teachers will be able to express themselves. Taking Kamaravadivelu's (2003) argument into consideration ways should be found to develop an uniquely Korean way of English teaching and learning that will benefit the learners and improve their language proficiency.

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