

Article Title

Coping with Cultural Obstacles to Speaking English in the Korean Secondary School Context

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Abstract

The Korean Ministry of Education has given priority to communicative competence in this current 7th curriculum, a major shift from previous curriculum methodologies. But the Korean English teachers have expressed their skepticism about the efficiency compared with the amount of time and money being put in, citing various reasons such as large class size, different levels of students' spoken English, and teachers' poor spoken English. The presenter singles out Korea's collectivistic culture as one of major factors which impede the improvement of students' spoken English. He analyzes various negative features of Confucianism and collectivism, and other English environmentally negative factors in the Korean secondary school context which discourage students from speaking English. He also provides possible solutions to these cultural barriers.

Introduction

The Korean Ministry of Education has given priority to communicative competence in the 6th and the current 7th curriculum of the Korean English education. In accordance with this new tenet, the shift in major teaching methods from the ever-dominant grammar-translation method to the communicative approach has been made in the classroom over the past several years. Currently teaching models designed to improve communicative competence have been implemented. Various teaching methodologies have been “imported” from foreign countries, especially the United States and been applied to the Korean secondary English context. Korean English teachers have been urged to speak the target language (English) as much as they can to provide students with maximum comprehensible input. Students are also encouraged to maximize the use of English by engaging in the various activities and tasks in and outside the classrooms. Other possible measures have been taken to improve students’ spoken proficiency.

Despite these vigorous efforts, the communicative competence drive seems to be stalling. The Korean English teachers in the secondary school system have expressed strong skepticism about the efficacy of spoken English compared with their efforts and the investment in time and money that have been put in. They have cited major reasons for the inefficiency such as very large class size, difference of students’ English level and lack of teacher’s spoken English proficiency, etc.

But when all these problems cited are solved, then will communicative competence initiative move forward? The answer seems unlikely. If we consider cultural factors peculiar to Korea, we realize that the Korea’s collectivism and Western individualism constantly come into perplexing conflict with each other. The cultural factors interwoven with socio-political and historical ones are at work behind its inefficiency of the communicative initiative. That is to say, *the clash of cultures*. Therefore, this study aims to elaborate on socio-cultural aspects within the Korean secondary school context, together with political and historical ones that impede the development of students’ spoken English and come up with workable solutions to the problems.

Various Types of Cultural Barriers Behind Poor Spoken English

1. Definitions of Collectivism and Individualism

Individualism holds that the individual is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. This view does not deny that societies exist or that people benefit from living in them, but it sees society as a collection of individuals, not something over and above them. (Kim, U., Triandis, H., C., Choi, S-C., & Yoon, G. 1984)

On the other hand, collectivism holds that the group---the nation, the community, the proletariat, the race, etc.---is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. This view does not deny the reality of the individual. But ultimately, collectivism holds that one's identity is determined by the groups one interacts with, that one's identity is constituted essentially of relationships with others. (Kim, U., Triandis, H., C., Choi, S-C., & Yoon, G. 1984)

2. Negative Features of Collectivism at School

Like individuals and groups, schools have cultures, too. These usually mirror the culture of the dominant society. Korea's strong collectivism-oriented culture has a profound influence on the school system. It serves as one of the most detrimental factors which discourage speaking English in the school context. According to one study, the Korean and American Indian collectivistic values most often conflict with those of the individualistic U.S. culture (Kim & Choi 1994; Suina & Smolkin 1994). Table 1 shows some salient features of collectivism and individualism. Korea, Japan, China and other Asian countries share most of the collectivistic features listed below.

Table 1. Salient Features of Collectivism and Individualism

Individualism (Representative of prevailing U.S. culture)	Collectivism (Representative of Asian cultures)
1. Fostering independence and individual achievement	1. Fostering interdependence and group success
2. Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, personal choice. (Me-ness)	2. Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus (We-ness)
3. Associated egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles(e.g. upward mobility)	3. Associated with stable hierarchical roles(dependent on gender, family background, age)

4. Individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher.	4. Individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher
5. Neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face.	5. Face-consciousness(In Korea, <i>Chemyun</i>) is weak
6. Associated with private property, individual ownership	6. Associated with shared property, group ownership

These fundamental values help form notions of people’s right and responsibilities, what roles they may take within societies, norms of communication, and ideas of how to rear and educate children.

Applying the Cultural Framework

■ Collectivistic Culture that Stifles Individual Initiatives and Uniqueness

Any native English speakers who have ever taught English in the Korean public or private education system might have wondered why Korean students are so tacit in class. A native English speaker once complained about his students to me. “Even the students who come to practice spoken English remain silent during class. I really don’t understand why they are in my class if they just sit and don’t talk at all. They are just wasting money.” Many foreign English teachers remember many cases where students seemed to hesitate to answer the questions posed to them, even when they knew the answer. Sometimes it might have caused misunderstandings. As a result, some teachers must have been upset, presuming that the student was ignoring him, leading to cross cultural communication failure. (Robertson, 2002, Kim 2002.)

What is blocking communication here are differences in cultures - tacit yet deep-seated beliefs about what matters in life and how people should behave. In the collectivism-oriented Korean society, a students' uniqueness and initiatives are not a virtue but a vice to be suppressed. Since Korea’s strong collectivistic culture is much like that of Japan, the following quotation gives us an inkling of where the deep-rooted aversion to individual uniqueness and initiatives originates.

“Fundamentally, Japanese culture is based on rice farming,” said Mr. Shirakawa, 65, reaching for a timeworn explanation for his countrymen’s widely perceived aversion to

individual initiatives. “Rice cultivation requires a lot of water, and water must be shared evenly by everyone. Planting rice also required teams of people walking from row to row, at the same speed. And all of this has meant that uniqueness had to be suppressed.”. – International Herald Tribune, 2000

In this vein, skillful self-expression, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in discussion and argument which individualistic societies uphold are not always good behavioral norms they have grown up with. In their view, a quiet student learns more and is more respectful than one who speaks up, singling himself out from the group and taking time away from the teacher’s lesson.

Speaking ability becomes perfect through the endless trial and error process. Even though teachers encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes while speaking English, Korean students hesitate to express their opinions freely because they are concerned about how others will see them and they have been brought up in the collectivistic culture where *chemyun* is valued.

While teaching English in the public education system, I have witnessed many cases in which some students who have lived abroad speak English freely in class and outside the classrooms. Then with the lapse of time, they are swirled into the “collectivistic melting pot” and gradually become silent.

■ “Eloquence may be Silver, Silence is Gold” Mentality

In order to sharpen their communicative skills, students should aggressively participate in class and group activities. In this vein, “Eloquence may be silver, silence is gold” is another major cultural barrier to the improvement of spoken English. For this reason, discussions, debates, group activities, and the interactions between students and teachers are difficult to be fully utilized. From their childhood, Korean students have been taught never to “show off” and stand out from the group. A talkative person is characterized by a “weightless” person, especially if you are a male, an old maxim dictates. “A word of honor is as good as a bond” prevails not only in the Korean society but also in the school system.

■ Confucianism and Hierarchical Society: Respect For Authority and Rare Peer Review

In the collectivistic societies, people are hierarchically related and social interaction is strongly defined by age and gender. Children raised in collectivistic communities form a sense of self from recognizing their place in the community hierarchy and from affiliation with the group. Children in such societies are less likely to be asked to formulate and share their opinions or to talk about what

they are learning in school. The role of sharing opinions and knowledge is reserved for people with higher status (Delgado-Gaitan 1994).

This mentality permeates every fabric of Korean society combined with Confucianism. The school system is not an exception. Just listening to teachers respectfully in class without expressing their opinions is a norm in the Korean education system. The collectivistic orientation also extends to notions of peer review. Since it is kind of a mutual admiration society, Korean people do not want to speak openly in criticism of someone else's work. For example, a student may resist offering the right answer after another student has answered incorrectly, in order not to embarrass that person in front of the group.

3. English-unfriendly School Culture: From Historical and Socio-Political Perspectives

According to the English methodology books imported from abroad, it is recommended that students should transfer what they have learned in class to outside the classroom so that the knowledge and skills the students acquire in their classrooms can be reinforced and retained. The Korean Ministry of Education has been working on how to create the environment in which students talk with each other in English in class and outside the classrooms. But it must be noted that those methodologies were mostly developed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context and that situation is quite different from that of Korea, which is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

Therefore it is not feasible and, in a sense, too idealistic to prod students to speak English outside the classrooms. From what Korean English teachers have closely observed, students never speak English among themselves outside the classrooms. What is worse, Korean English teachers do not tend to be willing to speak English to their students and co-workers outside the classrooms. Especially co-workers teaching other subjects than English do not like English teachers speaking English outside the classrooms especially when they work together.

The following examples show the English-unfriendly atmosphere in school. If you are a Korean English teacher, then go outside the classroom and speak English to your students. You might hear negative responses from your students or your co-workers. In my experimentation, students and

some co-workers' responses have been usually like this. "Oh, please!! English gives me a headache. Stop it, please."

To create English enriched and friendly settings, a Korean English teacher decorated his classroom in English. The next day she heard a flurry of criticism and cynicism from a couple of her co-workers. Another example is that while preparing a school festival, students decorated their display in English. One Korean language teacher lamented over the "invasion of English" and the erosion of the Korean language. What all these examples imply is that the Korean educational environment is not still favorable to speaking English outside the classroom.

Speaking English has more far reaching implication than only cultural one. It has socio-political and historical implications, too. Some Korean people, especially beyond middle-aged ones, have a strong tendency to link English with *Americanization*. Since the colonized Korea was deprived of the Korean language by Japan, Koreans still feel antagonistic about speaking English in daily lives. One of my co-workers told me about an incident where she spoke English with her Korean friend in the street and was about to be physically assaulted by a middle-aged man. Thus, encouraging students to speak outside the classrooms is too a naïve idea. It is possible in the ESL context. But it's not in the EFL context like that of Korea.

How to Bridge Cultural Barriers

Cultural change takes a considerable time because change in the value system must be accompanied. Korea is a hybrid society where collectivism and individualism are intermingled, but still relatively skewed more toward collectivism. English teachers can't just sit back and wait until the ideal English-friendly environment is created for us. English teachers should seek to find ways to utilize various teaching strategies within the limited environment.

■ Use Group Work

The quiet buzz of voices from the classroom echoes down the hallway. The thirty-some-odd students in an intermediate English class in a Bangkok high school are telling stories, joking, gossiping, and talking about the latest popular songs. As the teacher walks in, the students fall silent, face forward, and open their textbooks in anticipation of another English lesson, another day of reciting, repeating, copying, reading aloud, translating sentences, and answering multiple-choice question. < Teaching By Principles (pp. 164), Douglas Brown >

This is a case in Bangkok, Thailand, but it exactly applies to the English class in Korea. In a collectivistic and Confucian society, it is too much to expect students to take initiatives. Thus teacher-centered teaching methods or rote learning styles should give their way to the group-oriented activities. Since group work generates interactive language, it should be manipulated strategically in class (*Teaching By Principle*, pp. 178; Douglas, Brown). Interaction is what communication is all about. Instead of conforming to the traditional teaching styles based on Confucianism, English teachers should be well-informed about various teaching interaction-based methodologies, manipulate them and develop their own teaching methods compatible with the Korean education context to promote interaction among students.

■ Hire More Foreign Teachers

Aforementioned, within the EFL environment like the Korean secondary school context it's too idealistic to recommend and expect English teachers and students to speak English outside the classrooms. Given this constraint, it will be of great service in many ways if foreign teachers stay with English teachers at their workplaces. It will appear quite natural for English teachers to speak English with native English speakers. While surveying thirty some co-workers, I have found a very interesting point. They have a double standard. While teachers do have negative opinions about students talking to each other in English in front of them, they do not have any negative viewpoints about students following foreign teachers and speaking English to them. After all it will enhance the improvement of students' and teachers' spoken English and have ripple effects on change in mindsets of Korean English teachers, their co-workers, and students. Hence, depending on how we use foreign teachers, it can be catching more than two birds with one stone.

Some Korean teachers have argued that hiring foreign teachers has been a waste of time and money and ultimately it proved to be cost-ineffective. Here are two contrasting examples of hiring foreign teachers depending on how we have used them. A school hired a foreign teacher. Too obsessed with “chemyun”, all English teachers stayed away from him not to show their poor spoken English in front of other teachers and students. In sharp contrast, I have met a female teacher whose English sounded exactly like a native speaker. Quite startled, I asked her how long she had lived abroad. “I have never been abroad”, she replied. And then she explained the secret to me. When the time came for her to get transferred to other schools, she found out the schools where foreign teachers were hired. After spending with foreign teachers for more than five years, her English has improved leaps and bounds.

Before we argue that hiring foreign teachers is cost-ineffective and not right for our education environment, we should ask ourselves first how well we have used them in and outside the classrooms.

■ **Facilitation of Only English Areas (OEAs)**

Now that it is difficult to speak English because of various English speaking unfriendly factors mentioned, OEAs (Only English Areas) should be provided and facilitated in each school. The OEAs should be staffed with native English teachers or Korean English teachers, English music is played all the time and students must speak English there. They will serve as a "limited ESL" environment and students can get feedback on what's been covered in class.

■ **English Teachers as Cultural Mediators**

Korean English teachers are also accustomed to Confucian teaching methods and may have negative attitudes toward students who take individual initiatives, participate in class aggressively and "challenge" their ideas. Korean English teachers are also too obsessed with "*chemyun*" culture. They are afraid of making mistakes and hesitate to speak English in and outside the classrooms. They are English teachers but their way of thinking is too Korean.

Therefore, change in the mindsets of Korean English teachers are of great importance. They should possess role flexibility. They should keep in mind that one of English teachers' role is to help students as cultural mediators. In order to be cultural mediators, Korean English teachers should learn more about the cultures of English speaking countries and be given more overseas training opportunities to get exposed to the cultures of English speaking countries.

■ **Change in Mindsets of School Managers**

School managers do not know the details of English class. Debates, discussions, and highly interactive class which engages various group activities are inherently talkative and "noisy". But still many principals and vice principals have negative attitudes toward "noisy" lessons. They usually prefer a quiet class to "talkative and noisy class". Some have a bias that if the class is noisy, students do not study and just play. School managers should change their mindsets about English class. In the hierarchical school system, realistically teachers cannot change principals. The Board of Education should constantly try to have principals well informed of the characteristics of English class.

Conclusion

From the cultural perspective, I have singled out the Korea's strong collectivism and Confucianism as the major factor which inhibits speaking English within the Korean secondary school context. It is also pointed out that speaking English has also socio-political and historical implications. As the paradigm of communicative competence becomes pervasive in English class and gains its momentum, the challenge facing spoken English will go beyond language.

More diverse, perplexing and complicated features of cultural conflicts between collectivism and individualism will come to the surface. English educators should gain a deeper understanding of undercurrent cultural conflicts looming large and try to head off its impacts which will play out in the English education arena in the foreseeable future. Finally I hope other teachers reading this paper will share it with colleagues in their own schools and could see possibilities for thoughtful innovations in their teaching methods.

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