



Article Title

English Only (EO) In The Classroom: Time For a Reality Check?

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Abstract:

That the EO question, at times, has been framed in "all or nothing" views, has appeared to take away from a common sense approach. There may be a more middle ground area, at least as a point of departure towards meeting the requirements of the English language teaching curriculum. This article considered the application of English only as was stipulated by the Korean Education Ministries 7th curriculum which came into force in 2000. The theme has wider application than just Korea, and extends to the Asian classroom.

Introduction

The approach of using only English when teaching English as prescribed by the seventh curriculum has become a major issue in the debate over how to improve Korean students' communicative abilities in the L2. Discussions have not always been pleasant about the need to shake up the education system by different means, including using much more classroom English. (Fracas over Education, 2001). That the EO question, at times, has been framed in "all or nothing" views has appeared to take away from a common sense approach.

There may be a more middle ground area, at least as a point of departure towards meeting the requirements of the new curriculum.

In Japan, a direct export competitor to Korea, pressures on English teachers are also rising. A Prime minister's commission on Japan's future suggests that citizens there should have a workable knowledge of English by the time they become adults. (Moriyama, 2000, p. 1). Here in Korea, a survey of 100 middle and high school teachers attending in-service training at Kyungpook National University and the Teachers Training Institute in Kummi, showed that teachers felt they didn't speak English very well for many classroom purposes (McGrath, 2001, pp. 6, 7). Is it any wonder that the Korean Education Ministry views drastic approaches as imperatives rather than options. But in view of a recent departmental survey showing that only a small minority of the country's English teachers are communicatively competent in English, (Arirang, 2001) is EO a rather premature and blunt instrument?

This paper will attempt to sum up some of the main arguments for English Only (EO) vs the (BI) bilingual approach. Through a literature review and an analysis of the author's quasi research, action research, and observations made over five years of teaching Korean middle school students and Korean teachers, it will be argued that a more diverse approach is needed than what EO or BI presents. In addition, some methodological tips will be made partly through a demonstration following the delivery of this paper to help teachers to better introduce and integrate classroom English into their lessons.

Through all of this, it is hoped that various teachers, both native (NT) and non-native (NNT) will have a better perspective on making their teaching yield more results. Nothing less is being demanded by parents, students and education officials.

Literature Review

In summary, some academics and teachers' groups see EO as unrealistic, though a noble idea, (South Korea to Start English-Only..., 2001, p. 1). Others, including renown educators see it as a necessity to jump start students into performing better communicatively, (Ahn, 2001, p.1). What are the more specific findings from supporters of the so called pro EO school of thinking and the detractors?

First, let's look at the literature which seems to advocate a pro EO stance. Professor Ahn, (2000), Chairman of the English Department at Pusan National University, believes that one of the biggest drawbacks to successful communicative teaching of English in the schools is the lack of spoken English used by the teachers. He adds that despite students having spent a thousand hours learning English in the classroom, they are still unable to communicate in English. To remedy this problem, Ahn lists a number of recommendations including using English only. Professor In Lee (2001) at Chonju National University of Education states, "No one can deny the importance of teaching English through English" and believes that "English should be the medium of instruction" (p. 1).

An EPIK teacher holding a doctorate makes references to the definite benefits students receive from speaking L2 with a trained and experienced native speaker in ESL or EFL

teaching (Robertson, 2001). An authentic sense of communicative competency and improvement can result when such foreign teachers are fully utilized and deliver their L2 program unhindered, he adds. Roh (2001) in his lecture remarks reported that students surveyed stated they viewed the "non-ethnic" as an ideal model from whom to learn English. (A seemingly narrow concept of a native speaker which will be hopefully corrected) Would not an EO approach done competently, especially but not entirely by trained native teachers, give students a better sense of accomplishment from an extension of this thinking?

As well, other educators point out the sensibility of using English in the classroom. "They (students) must recognize that if they want to be able to use their English at the end of their course, they must practice it during the course" (Willis, 1997 , p. xiii). Jeong (2001) at Chung-ang University states, "English teachers should aim, not only to teach English in English but to exploit the authentic situations that arise in the classroom for meaningful interaction (p. 3). He further suggests that by speaking more English in the classroom, teachers will be fulfilling the adage "practice makes perfect" in respect to their oral English development (p. 3).

What might be some of the experiences outside Korea supportive of EO? In reference to teaching English as a second language in America, Johns (2001) states that the teacher need not understand the L1 of minority students and that (younger) children have a way of acquiring another language naturally without a need for heavy reliance on the grammar method (p. 1). From Hong Kong, one paper states that "overuse and counter productive use

of the native language must be avoided" (Ho, 1985, p.1). Of course, comparisons between Hong Kong, America and Korea must keep in mind that the former is a second language environment, America is an L1 English environment whereas the latter is strictly a foreign language one.

A pro EO view might also contend that BI reinforces a co-teaching approach where the NNT prefers to focus on translation, supplementing instructions and disciplining, all in Korean. This could take away from creating an English atmosphere to encourage students to speak more frequently and in culturally relevant English. BI in short, may make it too easy for students and teachers to minimize both communicative content, practice and thinking in English.

On the other hand, academics such as Professors Su-jung Min at Pusan National University and Kyu-tae Jung at Deonso University (2000) argue that at least, within the university establishments, (which train teachers to be) EO policy is based on false assumptions (p. 57). They add, "Research reports finding L2 only in the classroom neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (page 59). Piasecka (1988) sees negotiation of the lesson, cross-cultural issues and classroom management at times as better discussed in L1 (p. 99). Jang (1999) writes, "To teach a foreign language, teachers should have linguistic knowledge of both an L1 and L2" (p. 124). Taking this argument further, one might conclude that there is no necessity to use many EPIKs (English Program in Korea) in teacher training who are neither bilingual nor well versed in Korean culture!

Min and Jung (2000) also view those teachers who are not bilingual and bi-culturally literate as being limited in their ability to teach English in a most effective manner sensitive to Korean students' interests, experiences, and Korean language patterns (p. 64). They refer to the lack of success with the EPIK program due in part to the low number of bilingual and bi-culturally grounded recruits (p. 65). Hoelker, (1998) formerly at Seoul National University, made somewhat similar statements when she stated, "cultural education and assimilation of incoming teachers in the EPIK program is a concern" (p. 1). A former EFL teacher in Korea contends "that having some understanding of Korean culture enables the teacher to deliver her/ his message to students in a more meaningful way" (Windle, 2000, p. 6).

In reference to NNTs themselves and cultural integration, Roh (2001) through extensive research of 286 students and 83 teachers at the secondary level in Kyongi province concludes that an EO approach is not conducive to properly ensuring students understand English in its cultural context (pp. 9-18). He further argues that because the concept of American culture being superior to Korean culture is dominant in many Korean students' thinking, EO is less effective in support of socio-linguistic learning, (p. 4).

Somewhat surprisingly, a number of papers related to research in Hong Kong appear to also underline the problems of many students learning English through only English. Ho (1985) states in reference to questionnaire findings from 28 schools' remedial English classes, "complete avoidance of the native language (L1) was not possible" (p. 1). Even in Hong Kong- "many pre-service English teacher trainees find it almost impossible to

survive in primary and junior secondary classrooms without using the mother tongue" (Lai, 1996, p.173). More specifically, in relation to when L1 can best be applied, some researchers see it as particularly useful for concept development and the transfer of cognitive and academic proficiency, (Park and others, 1984, p.1). These conclusions relate to Asian minority students being observed by a variety of Illinois immersion, bilingual and ESL program teaching personnel.

Personal Observations and Quasi-research

First it needs to be stated that the limited sampling and crudeness of the surveys employed leads the researcher to regard this study as being of an exploratory kind. That being said, many of the EO research findings by the author tend to support quite a few observations made over five years of teaching. That in itself does not make the findings conclusive, of course. But as a starting point, it needs to be stated that research and observations by this author through September 1996 to present tend to show that students and teachers feel much more comfortable with a bilingual approach, (Dash 1999, Dash 2001).

In February and March 2001 respectively, 33 Grade three students and 110 Grade two students at a Kangwon Province boys' middle school were surveyed on EO, (Dash 2001). Grade three students stated that they wanted Korean teachers to use English about 50% of the time whereas the second grades averaged 55-60%. Interestingly, the third grade students had a more limited exposure time to the native speaker and had no exposure to English in the elementary school system. Contrastingly, second grade students had been

exposed to English at the primary level.

Through informal conversations, many middle school teachers seem to have some reservations about the EO policy but often are publicly reluctant to express it. In a survey of one Kangwon school, NNTs indicated a preference for a bilingual approach. Unfortunately, only half the teachers returned the survey.

But just because many more students and Korean teachers are comfortable with BI, does not necessarily fully legitimize it. One might argue that this apparent preference for a bilingual approach is partly because Korean teachers and students feel it is just too much extra work to have to speak and listen to so much English, but it may be a rather incomplete explanation in light of the reviewed literature and the author's own research and impressions.

It is also fair to point out that the differences between English and Korean, linguistically and culturally are so great at times that it is not possible to explain every grammar point or cultural difference in English from which a particular lesson might give benefit. This would seem to be supported by various authors, (Min and Jung and Piasecka). Or it might sometimes be possible, but the inordinate amount of time to do so could take away from the imperative to cover a fairly lengthy curriculum in preparation for examinations or satisfying the concerns of principals and supervisors. As well, a majority of students in the Kangwon survey stated they did not speak enough English because it was too difficult to do and they were worried about making mistakes, (Dash, 2001). On the shorter term, these

problems are unlikely to be solved through policy directives.

Ironically, those teachers using EO in the strictest sense might perceive their students as being penalized in terms of entrance eligibility to better high schools and universities as some middle school teachers seem to be suggesting. While this is but a hypothesis, the whole examination driven approach including limited testing of oral English production does not logically benefit from using more classroom English in many teachers' or students' minds. Ahn (2000) refers to the examination system in schools as being badly thought out, (p. 1). Robertson (1999) writes how in the Czech Republic the authorities have established comprehensive High school (Maturita) oral exams in English, involving fifteen minute oral presentations and follow-up questions by a panel of 5 examiners, (p. 15).

With the above in mind, EO policy may need to be more holistically examined in terms of curriculum, assessment, teacher training and competency. When students in the Kongwon school survey by the author were asked if they thought their marks would (directly or indirectly) go up if they spoke more often in class in their L2, approximately 60% responded in the negative, (Dash 2001). Interestingly, most girls surveyed at the Pusan model school provided opposite views, (Dash 1999).

Based on action observations and quasi research by Dash (1999) at two Pusan middle schools in the Dongbu district, increasing the use of classroom English was seen as viable. But most teachers struggled to use it at both the model girls' school and a downtown boys' school. At the boys' school, two of the three teachers who were courageous to try EO

incurred substantial problems. Many students at times became restless or didn't know what to do. Teachers seemed exhausted after the lesson and unnerved. One NNT who had excellent English speaking ability was able to carry out a near EO lesson in a level one "tracked" class of grade three middle school students. The lesson plan titled "Classroom Village," related to learning 'directions', was communicatively oriented and curriculum friendly. But one might conclude that if the language items had not been more of a review basis and without many cues and TPR, too many students might have had a rather incomplete understanding of the lesson.

Further, at the Pusan girls' middle school, most students said they could not understand their NNT's English and a large majority did not like it when their NNT spoke in L2, (Dash, 1999). At that point, the targeted teacher, with a few years teaching experience decided it was no longer productive to carry out additional research in other classes taught by her. Results from Kangwon province showed the opposite for a class taught by a Korean teacher with a fairly good ability in communicative English and willingness to use a relatively high amount of classroom English, (Dash 2001). These surveys, while helpful, can be a rather trying experience when teachers do not get the results they hoped for. But rather than solely blaming the teacher, EO policy may need to be more holistically examined in terms of curriculum, assessment, teacher training and the overall social environment.

If Hong Kong remedial classes require the use of L1, how can Korean teachers be expected to completely avoid it if low learners are to be provided an acceptable education? The net

effect of the EO policy, from such a line of thinking might be the need to track students, an approach which much literature shows can be debilitating to the psychological welfare and learning of many students labeled as low stream learners, (Carrick Report, 1989, p.1) (Oakes, 1995, p 5). Personal observations indicate that tracking for teaching English within the Korean cultural context has been an abysmal failure especially when three level tracking has been implemented.

More importantly, it appears from observations over four years of training Korean teachers, that some feel quite limited in their ability to deliver what they feel is acceptable classroom English, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Part of it may be a confidence problem and not much more. With others, it may be a need for more direct training in classroom English. The lack of an L2 environment also hinders student and teacher's motivation to significantly improve their English and entertain a more aggressive teaching of spoken English.

That there are so few native speakers in Korean schools -about one EPIK per 60,000 students and per 2,500 teachers- underscores further what I coin as a NEMBY (No-native English in my back yard) effect so characteristic for so many Korean schools and communities, (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 1). The more that English is relevant to students' environments, the more they will feel they have the opportunity to use it and to go along with a near EO approach, (McGrath, 2001, p. 7). For example, students at the authors' school at first did not speak to the NT. But after a few months of repetitive exposure within and outside the classroom, they had the confidence to try to communicate.

The better skilled students are fairly relaxed and converse with the NT. Consistent with these observations, 90% of students in the Kangwon survey, (Dash 2001) said they wanted a native teacher.

Further, the low number of EPIKs and sometimes low priority on this program take away from NNTs' chances to upgrade their classroom English in a meaningful way. Again, students may feel that English speaking has even less relevance to their life when a native speaker is not present. In summary, a reformed EO approach complemented by enlargements of teacher training and a well managed EPIK could overflow into expanding the use of oral English in the classroom.

A Third Way?

But what does this mean in terms of what can be an effective EO policy and accompanying methodology in the classroom? Firstly, each district, school and teacher is faced with a particular set of circumstances for which the seventh curriculum seems to provide further recognition, (i.e. decentralization of policy and curriculum implementation). Consistent with that fact and the best education practices of identifying the needs of all students, EO appears to be an overreaching policy particularly but not exclusively to more remote and rural environments. In such environments, one could argue that communicative English is even less important in terms of the overall student and population linguistic needs. A native speaker may help improve English speaking-but to what future end? However, there is a strong argument that improving tolerance towards foreigners through their greater presence in such communities be they English speaking or non-English speaking

expatriates is of some important value. In the author's former community, not counting the teachers, the only foreigners who visit in "significant" numbers are from Japan who generally rely on those who can speak Japanese as opposed to English it would appear. And Japan is the closest country to South Korea-not America. By taking into account such local conditions, as well as pedagogical realities, it appears that a near EO as opposed to pure EO policy would be even more relevant on a national basis.

What might be a good model for a near EO approach? For example, Atkinson, (1997) in his paper on the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, states, "...a ratio of 5 percent native language to 95 percent of the target language may be more profitable, " (p. 242). He refers to how translation can still be useful in some cases when there is a need for a comprehension check, (p. 243). Trimble (1993) underscores how translation at times (through an integrated approach of using written work) can facilitate students to more readily think in English for communicative and other work, (p. 1). Minzuno (1998) writes of the utility of doing contrastive analysis of sentences in Japanese and English which have the same or similar meaning to help students internalize (spoken) English, (p. 1).

Additionally, when teachers significantly change methods, materials or tasks for example when never or little used before, students should have the right to express themselves in some L1 detail as to what they did not understand, (Atkinson, p. 244). Precluding such possibilities can reduce the effectiveness of teacher and learner as Atkinson would seem to be suggesting. For teaching professionals, who one might argue should be doing action research on their own self generated curriculum complementary to the Korean seventh

curriculum, the quality of future findings might benefit from allowing students to make comments in L1.

As far as the implications for teacher training are concerned, Harbord (1992) points out that many teachers have tried to create an EO classroom but have found they have failed to get the meaning across leading to student incomprehension and resentment, (p. 350). Quasi-research by the author in Pusan and references in the introduction seems to bear this out, (Arirang T.V., 2001) (Dash 1999) (McGrath, 2001). Adults can also feel that they may appear as less than intelligent and sophisticated people when only able to use L2 particularly in the presence of native teachers, (Min and Jung, 2000, p .59). Johnson and Swain (1997) views in reference to immersion add some additional weight when they state native teachers "...are unaware of the psycholinguistic burdens of studying through a foreign language," (p. 15) .

Where cultural inequity exists or is felt to exist, such a wholesale monolingual/mono-cultural approach in L2 may take away from effective learning - or at worst, create a backlash or sense of cultural imperialism. This is particularly true for adults who tend to be more politicized and entertain stronger national sentiments than younger children who have limited political cognition. It may have further relevance for teacher training when licensed Korean English teachers with considerable pride about their credentials -but sometimes with limited communicative English- stumble trying to make a point. If the native teacher is not sufficiently qualified to recognize such problems and cross cultural issues, the classroom environment can be less conducive to the harmony on which Koreans

place such a premium.

Conclusions

With an attempt to balance those views as described in the literature with personal observations and research, knowing that all teachers need to be challenged to constantly improve, setting some targets on classroom English can be beneficial. But it can be an exercise fraught with some danger of being an arbitrary exercise. With all this in mind, Atkinson's (1997) view that a 95% ceiling might be a more acceptable level may be a better starting point. If flexibility is also allowed for taking into consideration local conditions and circumstances faced by the districts, schools, teachers and other school officials, then such a ceiling appears to be more realistic than current policy. But given survey results, (Dash 2001, Dash 1999) less than 50% classroom English would seem to be below the stated desired goals of the students, (and the teachers).

With more students experiencing elementary school teaching of English and hopefully, better trained middle school teachers developing and arriving on the market, it would be hoped that Atkinson's "maxim" should be more the standard than the exception by the beginning of the eighth curriculum. But surely, if all the advantages of using more classroom English are to be obtained, (Ahn, 2000, Jeong 2001)) then programs like EPIK and other training efforts need to be stepped up. Following from the evidence of McGrath (2001) and the Ministry of Education (Arirang T.V. 2001) it would seem that Korean English teachers need to better gain that confidence and level of skills which would make them use more spoken English.

Under the present educational regime, EO when considered as especially applicable to all English classes may be but a romanticized ideal rather than a point of arrival sometime in the intermediate future. A point of immediate departure must be to begin to significantly increase the use of classroom English universally which leads to authentic learning of real English by fostering better training and action research. For in the many classes the author observed, there was room to do so without compromising overall education goals and student needs. In short, we need a more flexible and nearer to EO goal for today with proper support for a near EO policy of tomorrow.

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