

An assessment of the present condition of English education in Korean schools, together with recommendations for improving English education in the Gyeongnam school system.

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According to a recent survey by the Korea Consumer Protection Board, over 40 percent of respondents said that they were dissatisfied with the country's English education system. They also complained about the lack of after-school English activities. It is very common for Korean students to go to private language institutes. Some of them even travel to English-speaking countries to learn English, which costs their parents substantial (and in some cases astronomical) amounts of money.

Our first observation is that many Koreans lack confidence in the primary and secondary English curricula, and that there is a concomitant serious public distrust of the public school system.

The Korean schooling system has been at the center of such criticism. The excessive emphasis upon achieving top scores in English, together with several other subjects such as Math and Korean, is highly discouraging to those students who lack either the desire or the ability to excel in English. Just as playing a musical instrument has a value that should not merely be equated to the obtaining of credits, so too there are many qualities that a student may demonstrate that cannot be quantified, recorded or placed in rank order. By taking the measure of students through the use of statistics collated from test scores, the current system is overlooking the need to encourage lateral thinking, open debate, and independent thought. Learning by rote may well allow students to excel in test conditions; but it does not make for imaginative thinkers or creative problem-solvers. Korean students, in learning English in order to obtain higher scores, concentrate on memorizing numerous words and studying grammar. But these skills alone do not encourage the acquisition of speaking skills. Unfortunately the students' knowledge of the English language cannot simply be equated to their production of spoken English.

Our second observation is that an excessive emphasis on obtaining higher scores actually impedes effective English language education.

It would appear that - despite a plentiful supply of qualified Korean English teachers - pedagogical resources remain inadequate. Many students are dissatisfied with the quality of English teaching in school simply because their teachers are not capable of speaking English in their English classes. Students want to express themselves in English - but their teachers lecture them in Korean, or just let their students listen to tapes or watch videos. It is apparent that teachers are aware of their present situation, because they say that they want to learn spoken English. But the fact remains that they do not have access to effective learning opportunities for improving their English.

Our third observation is therefore that in general Korean English teachers, at the time of getting their teacher's license, are not well armed with English-speaking skills, and subsequently find it difficult to improve those English-speaking skills.

In the face of increasing demands for better Elementary English education, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Department has announced that it will expand English programs to all elementary school students by 2008. It will make significant improvements to the nation's current English curriculum. The ministry also plans to implement an English Immersion Program in 2008, where students will be taught school subjects in English. This will be implemented in three special economic zones, and on Jeju Island. In addition, by 2010, at least one native English speaker will be stationed at each of the 2,900 middle schools in the country.

Our fourth observation is thus that the government is clearly trying to provide a better environment for learning English, and effective advantage should be taken of these efforts.

Proposals for the improvement of English education in the Gyeongnam school system

Having given our personal assessment of the present conditions, we would now like to offer several proposals for the improvement of English education in Gyeongnam. Admittedly there are many problems, but one of the most serious is the level of Korean English teachers' command of spoken English. As a long-term reform measure, we therefore propose overhauling the current test-centered qualification test for Korean English teachers at public schools. Whilst in general recently employed Korean English teachers do speak better English than their predecessors, they too have been criticized for their poor command of the language. Currently, the only measures for their spoken English level are TOEIC/TEPS/TOEFL test scores, but these alone are not sufficient. We therefore propose those who wish to become English teachers should have to undergo English language interviews, preferably by qualified native speakers. As teachers are reluctant to enroll in private language institutes - largely because of the possibility of having to encounter and to study with their school students - the Gyeongnam Office of Education should expand their in-service programs and study abroad programs for teachers. Teachers will then be able to study English in a more conducive environment.

Secondly, it would be a good idea to introduce a program of Assessment of English Teachers, where Korean English teachers' language skills are assessed regularly. A similar program, introduced in the late 1980s, failed because of strong opposition from teachers; but in our opinion such an assessment remains a necessary evil, and should thus be implemented. This is because English teachers, despite criticism, have not taken to heart the serious measures necessary to improve their language skills and teaching methods. Principals and vice-principals should continue to encourage English teachers to use English more frequently in the classroom.

Thirdly, the government should recruit more qualified foreign (native speaking) instructors. In 2004, EPIK, the English Program in Korea, attracted only 104 foreign instructors. Most of the other instructors were recruited through private channels, which we observe often lack a satisfactory process of quality control.

Fourthly, we propose that more English Immersion programs be established. More English Villages and English Camps are needed, as well as various after-school programs for underage students. It is true that there are pros and cons when it comes to the early education of English and of other foreign languages. However, the global trend is to provide students with language education at an early age, and in this it is vital that Korea should not be left behind.

It is high time for Korean English teachers to critically evaluate their situation. It is not enough to complain about conditions, without taking appropriate action to improve those conditions. If we conclude that there is substantial room for improvement, we can then make a difference by acting, not merely by thinking. An individual who recognizes that at present he or she does not

speak English well, can then through conscious effort change course and work to improve his or her English-speaking skills. It is therefore necessary to change the classroom environment to the benefit of teachers and of students.

The Government intends to have approximately 3,000 native English speakers teaching in all schools by 2010 - how would these native speakers best be utilized?

Previously we discussed the announcement of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Department of its intention to expand English programs to all elementary school students; to make significant improvements to the nation's current English curriculum; and to implement English Immersion Programs. As part of this expansion, within four years at least one native English speaker will be stationed at every middle school. So we need to think of how best to deploy these native English speakers before they actually commence working in schools.

This will not be the first time native speakers have taught English in Korean schools. Up until the IMF crisis hit the country, many foreigners were working in our schools. At that time, their main duty was to teach students. But we now propose the situation should be approached from a different angle. Key to this is implementing a policy that gives a degree of priority to having the native speakers teach English to the Korean English teachers, to achieve gearing. Several alternatives are then feasible. Firstly, native speakers would only teach Korean English teachers, and not students. Secondly, all native speakers would divide their time between teaching Korean English teachers and teaching students. Thirdly, some of the native speakers would concentrate on teaching Korean English teachers, while others would concentrate on teaching students.

In support of the first alternative, Korean English teachers recognize that the main reason they do not use English in class is that they do not have an adequate command of spoken English. If the first priority for the native English speakers is to teach speaking skills to Korean English teachers, then teachers will use spoken English more often in the classroom when they in turn teach English to students. This approach suits a long-term perspective, where most benefit would accrue with the passage of time - e.g. after five years we expect there would be a significant improvement in the quality of student English education received from Korean English teachers.

However a conflicting priority is the view that students who want to learn English should be able to learn English from native speakers. From this viewpoint, the native speakers would be best employed simply in teaching students, as envisaged by government policy. This is perhaps a shorter-term perspective, which channels immediate benefits to students, but ignores the sorely needed longer-term improvement of English skills of the Korean English teachers.

A further consideration is the question of the suitability of the native speakers employed to teach Korean English teachers, in terms of both qualifications and experience. It is quite likely that a substantial proportion of the native speakers employed, while perhaps quite well suited to teaching students English, will lack adequate skills to teach Korean English teachers.

Therefore we tend to favor the third alternative, and suggest this could be taken account of in hiring policies. Some native speakers would be recruited, trained and deployed mainly for teaching English to Korean English teachers. Other native speakers (and they might well constitute the majority) would simply be recruited, trained and deployed mainly for teaching students. Nevertheless, either group of native speakers might, on occasion, be diverted to teach the Korean English teachers or students respectively that they normally would not teach.

Conclusion

In assessing the present condition of English education in Korea, we have made a number of general observations. Koreans lack confidence in the English curricula, and distrust their public school system. An excessive emphasis on obtaining higher scores impedes effective English language education. Korean English teachers do not in general have adequate English speaking skills, and find it difficult to improve those skills. The government is trying to provide a better environment for learning English, and it would be sensible to take optimal advantage of this.

In considering how best to improve English education in Gyeongnam, we respectfully suggest the following proposals. The current test-centered qualification test for Korean English teachers at public schools would be overhauled, and English language interviews instituted. Preferably, qualified native speakers would conduct the interviews. In-service programs and study abroad programs for teachers would be expanded. Korean English teachers' language skills would be regularly assessed. Korean English teachers would be encouraged to use English more frequently in the classroom. The government would recruit more qualified foreign instructors. More English Immersion programs - including English Villages and English Camps - would be provided to facilitate students' language education at an early age.

We need also to consider how best to deploy the large number of native English speakers the government intends to provide. This needs to be addressed before these native speaking teachers actually commence working in schools. We suggest a degree of priority should be given to having native speakers teach Korean English teachers - rather than exclusively teaching students - and detail the several options that then follow.

If first priority is given to having these native speakers improve the English speaking skills of Korean English teachers, this will then lead to Korean English teachers being more confident and able in their use of spoken English in the classroom. There would be a short-term loss of potential benefit to students, which would be offset by a longer-term contribution to having students learn English more effectively from Korean English teachers who would by then have significantly better English speaking skills. Conversely, it should be recognized that school students who want to learn English should be able to learn English in schools from native speakers, which suggests the native speakers would just teach students, with immediate benefit to students at the expense of improving the English-speaking skills of Korean English teachers.

A workable compromise is to tailor recruitment and management policies so that some native speakers are recruited, trained and deployed mainly for teaching Korean English teachers, whilst other native speakers are recruited, trained and deployed mainly for teaching students. This compromise provides flexibility, in that priorities can oscillate in time between teaching Korean teachers and students, in accord with policy and realities of supply and demand. This strategy, if wisely implemented, can provide a balanced mix of short- and long-term benefit to the teaching and learning of English in the Gyeongnam school system, whereby the English conversational skills of both Korean English teachers and students is greatly improved.
