

Issues Concerning Korean Learners of English: English Education in Korea and Some Common Difficulties of Korean Students

Byung-Eun Cho
SungKongHoe University, Seoul, Korea

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly to inform English teachers of the general situation of English language education in Korea, and secondly to describe some common difficulties of Korean learners of English. I hope to promote interaction between English teachers and Korean students and further enhance educational effectiveness in a mutually beneficial way.

A brief overview of English education in Korea is given first, followed by a review of some linguistic and cultural difficulties commonly experienced by Korean students. Some of the examples and illustrations are drawn from my experience and observation as a teacher of English for more than fifteen years in Korean universities, while others are drawn from my own experience as a self-aware Korean learner of English.

An Overview of English Education in Korea

Koreans take education very seriously. This is rooted in our cultural emphasis on diligence and in the demanding competition involved in gaining a place in a Korean university. Since English was taught as a required foreign language in secondary school onwards after the Korean War in the 1950s, learning to speak English has become more and more important to Koreans. Since 1997, in keeping with developments in information technology and globalization, English has been incorporated into the primary school curriculum.

Primary school children learn English for four years from years 3 to 6. The main aim of the English class is to encourage children's interest in English language and culture. Usually, children have one to two 40-minute classes per week in which they learn songs, games, and basic expressions in English using multi-media learning materials. The class size of about forty pupils makes the situation difficult for interaction between the teacher and children. Excepting in a few special schools, children rarely have a chance to meet a native speaker of English.

Korean secondary education consists of three years in a middle school followed by three years in a high school. The 7th National Curriculum (1997-2004) restricts the class size to 35-40 pupils, but many schools cannot afford this, resulting in oversized classes. Students learn English as one of three major subjects, along with Korean and Mathematics. Since secondary school is widely considered to be a preparatory stage for entering Higher Education, gaining a good grade is crucial. This tends to make students extremely exam-conscious. English teachers likewise focus on the skills needed to answer the exam questions, placing excessive emphasis on reading and grammar. Pupils have scarcely any conversation sessions, despite having three or four classes per week. Indeed while teachers have a good knowledge of English grammar and reading many are not fluent speakers of English.

By the time they finish middle school, students are expected to have a productive vocabulary of about 1500 words and high school graduates about 3000 words, with American English dominating. Nevertheless, the English they learn is textbook English bearing little relation to the English spoken by native speakers

Higher education in Korea is divided into 2- or 3-year technical college education and 4-year university degree courses. Students take English as a required subject and, many schools require

a certain level of English proficiency for graduation. General English classes consist of reading and language laboratory practice, plus a few optional conversation classes. Whereas technical colleges focus on general and business English, universities teach English for academic purposes. At both technical colleges and universities, class sizes tend to be large, ranging from thirty to forty students per class. Some schools provide English teaching that is more tailored to the individual student's language level and and for the first time as language learners, students have the opportunity to meet native speakers of English.

English is a big issue in the Korean Educational System.. To compensate for disadvantages such as lack of exposure to native speakers, large classes and grammar-oriented lessons, many students turn to extracurricular activities taught by native English tutors, or top private language institutions called *Hakwons* or 'English Academies.'. Parents of young learners are ready to invest money and time in helping to improve their children's English proficiency, thus stoking the already overheated English market. Many private English institutions are flourishing around the country, and the need for qualified native speakers in English is unusually high. Often parents' unfounded expectations about their child's English achievement can lead to negative consequences such as the child's loss of interest and motivation.

University students see this stage as their final preparation for a career and are thus highly motivated. In addition to their university English course, students attend private institutions from early morning or until late at night. Many students even defer for one or two years during their degree programme in order to obtain an English certificate abroad, which they know will subsequently give them a notable advantage when applying for a job.

Some Common Difficulties Experienced by Korean Learners of English

Language Differences

One of the most obvious difficulties for Korean students stems from the fundamental differences between the two languages. English belongs to the Indo-European Language Group, whereas Korean shares similar linguistic principles and structures to languages in the Ural- Altaic Language Family (Suh, 2003). The phonetic system, the syntactic structure, and semantics of the two languages are so different that the transition from one language to the other requires enormous efforts from the learner.

Phonetic Differences: One of the most baffling difficulties Korean learners of English experience comes from “the complexity of English words in spelling and sound correspondences” (Kim et al 1988:136). Unlike the orthography of Korean language in which “each letter corresponds to a sound unit (phoneme)” (Suh, 2003:240), an English letter or grapheme does not have one sound or phoneme, but is pronounced in several different ways, depending on the word. Differences in consonants and vowels between the two languages cause additional problems.

Differences in Consonants

- All Korean consonant stops, fricatives, and affricates are voiceless, whereas English has pairs of voiced and voiceless stops, fricatives and affricates. Many Korean students have difficulty in pronouncing voiced consonants such as /b, d, g, v, ð, z, /.
- Koreans have to make extra efforts to pronounce English labiodental consonants such as /f, v/, because the Korean language does not have them.
- Since Korean has one liquid sound /ㄹ/ for the English /l/ and /r/, Korean students have problems distinguishing /l/ from /r/ when pronouncing or listening.
- Korean students have difficulty distinguishing these pairs of voiced and voiceless sounds from each other, as in the case of /f/ & /v/; /p/ & /b/; /θ/ & /ð/; /t/ & /d/; /z/ & /dʒ/ & /r/ & /l/.

- Korean syllabic form normally follows CVC, with a consonant in the initial position followed by a vowel, whereas in English three consecutive consonants often come in the initial position. In that case, Korean students follow the pattern of Korean syllabic structure and insert an extra vowel between the consonants. Thus, “plight” is often pronounced “polite.”

Differences in vowels

- An English vowel that Korean students have difficulty pronouncing is /ɔ/, which does not exist in Korean. Some tend to substitute the Korean /o/ for it.
- Koreans use full strong stress for vowel sounds. Since there is no word stress, there are no weak forms. Some students feel uncomfortable when pronouncing unstressed English vowels such as schwa /ə/.
- Most Korean students have learned American English rather than British English and tend to pronounce r-coloured vowels, often over stressing them.

Differences in Stress

In contrast to English, a stress-timed language, Korean is a syllable-timed language (Cho, 2001). Since Korean is not a rhythmic language, it has neither word stress nor sentence stress. Each syllable is given the same emphasis in a word, and every word is pronounced with the same prominence in a sentence. With no distinction in pronunciation between function words and content words, the same interval is maintained between syllables, thus creating a very monotonous sound. One of the major tasks for Korean students is to gain familiarity with English stress and rhythm.

Syntactic Differences

In English, the word order is SVO (subject-verb-object), while the basic pattern of a Korean sentence is SOV (subject-object-verb). Although Korean has case-marking morphemes to designate the cases of the nouns and shows a more flexible word order, the predicate always comes at the end of a sentence. To make an English sentence, Korean students have to make a conscious effort to change the word order from Korean to English, one reason for their slow responses to teachers' questions. The following paragraphs explain the differences in detail.

The position of adverbs: In Korean, modifiers generally come before modified elements. The Korean counterpart to the English phrase 'hit strongly' is 'strongly hit', with the adverb (the modifier) coming before verb (the modified). The same principle applies to adverbs designating time and place: Korean students usually put these adverbs at the beginning of a sentence as in 'Yesterday at school I Sun-mi met', or immediately after the subject as in, 'I yesterday at school Sun-mi met', although the adverb is not used for emphasis.

Verb inflection: The Korean language has neither conjugation nor inflection, and verbs in the present tense do not take '-s' in the third person singular. One of the most common mistakes Korean learners of English make is to fail to ensure there is subject-verb agreement, by missing inflected endings in writing and speaking.

The position of relative clauses: In contrast to English, relative clauses in Korean come prior to the nouns they modify. Koreans say, "I really want to meet who the sportsman" instead of "the sportsman who I really want to meet." Koreans also prefer two separate simple sentences to a complex sentence with a relative clause. They say, "I really want to meet the sportsman and I sent a letter to him" rather than, "I sent a letter to the sportsman who I really want to meet." It is partly because Koreans are unaccustomed to the postmodification of relative clauses and partly because they know that the indirect object will become too heavy when they follow the Korean word order, which would be as follows, "I [[[I really want to meet who] the sportsman] to] a letter sent".

Cultural Differences

Since language is such a major vehicle of culture, Korean students' encounter with English can be both enriching and frustrating. Not only do they have difficulty in understanding and using individual words, idiomatic expressions, allusions and historical contexts, but they also find it hard to adjust to the different teaching methods. Since many Korean students learn by rote, listening, reading, observing and imitating (Cheng, 1998) and are unaccustomed to discussion and debate, they appear passive, timid, defensive and even shy when they are invited to express their opinions and ideas clearly.

A rough comparison/contrast between Korean and English culture provides some clues as to how to interpret Korean students' attitudes in English class. At least this can help eliminate some misunderstandings that English teachers may have about Korean learners.

Different Ways of Thinking: In contrast to English students, Korean students tend to express themselves in general and indirect ways, even when asked to communicate their ideas. This is because they have been trained to think inclusively and express themselves indirectly in case they might offend others. Such a reserved attitude originates from Confucian thinking, in which moderation is considered the supreme virtue. Students often have a hard time supplying specific details when describing things and events. Combined with the traditional Korean value in which specific enumeration of material wealth is considered vulgar and uncivilized, this tendency appears most clearly when using vague terms such as 'some' or 'any' rather than accurate and specific numbers, especially with reference to money matters.

Koreans' Group-oriented Thinking: the Family and Society Rank above the Individual. The first cultural difference that Korean learners may notice is the way that English-speaking people say and write their names. Unlike English-speaking people, Koreans put their family name first, followed by their given name, showing the importance of the family. Such a strong sense of belonging is revealed most obviously in Korean students' substitution of 'our' for 'my.' Instead of saying "my teacher," "my house," "my father," they say "our teacher" even when the listener is not a classmate, "our house" even when talking to a stranger, and "our father" even when the listener is not a sibling. In the same context, the phrase, 'on a first name basis' is strange to Koreans except among friends. This is because they do not call people by their names, but rather by their relationship or social/family roles, thus, instead of calling somebody "Tom," they call them "Jane's father" or "Bill's teacher."

Word Order in Idiomatic Noun Phrases as a Reflection of Culture: When studying English, Korean students notice interesting cultural principles in the word order of some idiomatic noun phrases. When they refer to the same notions, they produce phrases that reverse the usual English word order because they "approach a second language through analogies with their first" (Kosofsky 1987 IV). For example, Korean students are likely to say, "old and young", "east, west, south, and north," and "poor and rich," instead of "young and old," "north, south, east, and west," and "rich and poor." Each of these has cultural connotations. That is, in England the standard of direction is the North Pole, so 'north' comes first, whereas in Korea 'east' is the most important direction because the sun rises in the east. In the same way, since Koreans have learned to respect the elderly, they say "old and young." It is interesting to notice that, in both Korean and English, 'man' precedes 'woman' in 'man and woman' - a reflection of the patriarchal origins of both cultures.

Korean Language Habits Transferred into English: One of the most perplexing phenomenon Koreans experience in learning English is the fossilization of certain mistakes "caused by interference from their first language" (Kosofsky 1987 IV). For instance, many Koreans repeat the question-answer format of Korean negative questions when communicating in English. To the question, "Didn't you like it?" English speakers answer either, "Yes, I did" or, "No, I didn't," meanwhile many Koreans respond either "Yes, I didn't like it," or "No, I liked it." They use a

combination of positive and negative elements of discourse, which native speakers of English can find very puzzling. Korean students also experience fossilization problems when attempting to express conditionals, indirect questions, rhetorical questions and hypothetical statements.

Korean Learners' Lack of Native Speaker Intuition Into English Language: Most Korean learners have difficulty when speaking and writing in English because they lack a native speaker's intuition about the language. For this reason, although they have an accurate understanding of the meaning of certain expressions, they have an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the exact nuances and connotations associated with the expressions (Kosofsky 1987). They can be baffled about which prepositional word is used in a given context, or when to put 'a/an,' or 'the,' or no article before a noun. It is in this aspect that many Korean learners feel trapped in the maze of English language. To overcome this, some Korean parents take their young children abroad to English-speaking countries and try to equip them with near-native intuition through early exposure to English.

Korean Students' Behavior in the English Classroom: These days, young Korean students are so westernized that they can be as active and responsive as their American or British counterparts. Nevertheless, the following list of Asian students' behavior in classroom situations, given by Montoya (2002) and slightly modified to fit Korean students, provides a guideline for English teachers wanting to better understand their students.

- Some students may avoid eye contact as a sign of respect to their elders and teachers.
- Students may frown when they concentrate, not necessarily because they are displeased.
- The students' low tone of voice can often be interpreted as a sign of respect rather than a lack of confidence.
- Students are afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed in front of their classmates.
- Students may look down when approached by a teacher, out of respect or awe and not because of impoliteness or unfriendliness.
- Students may respond in short phrases because they may not feel confident or because they are too shy to respond. At the same time, when they have to elaborate their points, their discourse can become repetitive, redundant or circuitous. This is partly because of their shortage of vocabulary and partly because of their indirect way of expressing themselves.
- Volunteering information may be considered to be too bold and a form of showing off, and thus inappropriate.
- Young learners of English may giggle when they are embarrassed or when they are unable to understand the lesson.
- Korean teachers tend to avoid praise, because humility and self-criticism are highly valued. Korean students' blushing or embarrassment when praised can be interpreted in this context.

Other Obstacles of Korean Students

Foreign Language Ability versus Mental/Spiritual Maturity

When translating their thoughts into English, Korean learners, and especially university students, feel frustrated not only because of the sheer difficulty of English learning itself but also because of the gap between their English ability and their mental/spiritual maturity. Unable to properly express their ideas and thoughts in English, students may feel uneasy and disappointed, leading to further loss of interest and self-confidence in English. Some very self-conscious students may fear that their teacher will misinterpret their lack of expression as evidence of immaturity, or of their having learning problems.

The Disparity between Expectations and Reality

Compared to other subjects, it takes more time and effort to reach a proficient level in a foreign language. When students start to learn English, many aim for unrealistic goals such as an overall band of 7.0 in IELTS or a grade of 650 in TOEFL within a few months. When the results are disappointing students can lose interest and self-confidence.

Conclusion

Clearly, the difficulties Korean learners have in learning English are not limited to just Koreans. Students of any nationality may experience difficulties due to language difference, culture gaps, and the discrepancy between their language ability and their overall maturity. For Korean students, these difficulties present the main obstacles that cause, on the one hand, their passive, timid, and withdrawing attitude and, on the other hand, English teachers' misinterpretation of their behavior.

The question is how to overcome these difficulties in a way that promotes mutual understanding between Korean learners and English teachers, leading to effective teaching/learning. To bridge the culture gap, effort should be made by both English teachers and Korean learners. As Korean students' understanding of the Christian influence on Western culture helps them better comprehend English texts, so English teachers' learning of Korean students' religious, historical, and cultural background can substantially help enhance student-teacher interaction and produce a more rewarding teaching experience. From the students' standpoint, the teachers' inspiring comments and their constant encouragement of student participation are the most powerful way of assisting learning.

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The address of the writer is Dept. of English, SungKongHoe University (Korean Anglican University), 1-1, Hang-Dong, Guro-Gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea; #152-716; e-mail address: becho@mail.skhu.ac.kr