

How to Create an Effective English Learning Environment?

Given Lee
Seoul National University, S. Korea

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the changes Korean speaking teachers of English had experienced during their six-month In-service English Teacher Training Program (IETTP) and on the obstacles they encountered as they tried to implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in their own classroom after the training sessions. The participants were 46 Korean secondary English teachers who had attended the IETTP. Data were gathered from various sources, including the participants' reflective writings, interviews, surveys, as well as the researcher's notes. Analysis of the preliminary data demonstrated that at the beginning of the training sessions, teachers did not feel comfortable with the idea that they should CLT, particularly teaching English through English (TETE); nonetheless, as the training sessions continued, they seemed to gain more confidence and motivation. However, after the training sessions, many teachers expressed their challenges in adopting CLT in their classroom, particularly in a classroom with students whose English ability is low and who are not motivated to learn English in English. This study suggests that rather than pushing all teachers to use English only in class and all students to learn English in English, it is important to provide an opportunity for students to choose whether to take an English-only class or not and give instruction accordingly.

I. Introduction

In discussions of teaching methods or approaches, one way to overcome the constraints of the EFL context such as lack of sufficient language input and interactions with native speakers of English is the teacher's exclusive use of English in the English classroom (Curtain, 1993; Tarnopolsky, 1999, 2000). Advocates of CLT methods (Long, 1983a, 1983b; Krashen, 1982; Omaggio, 1993) have argued that regardless of whether they are native language speakers or nonnative language speakers, the teachers' exclusive use of the target language will gradually lead learners to increase their communicative language ability. Other scholars have claimed that students in EFL situations often have very little contact with native English speakers. This results in a scarcity of authentic input and interactions in the target language for these language learners. Therefore, the teacher's use of English in the classroom can play a crucial role in the improvement of learners' communicative competence. Similarly, Rosenthal and Sloane (1987) have suggested that the teacher's primary use of the target language greatly "increased students' motivation and confidence in their own abilities to handle foreign language situations" (p. 246).

However, Turnbull (2001) argued that "there is not a linear relationship between the teacher's target language use and the students' target language proficiency" (p. 316). Similarly, in her study, Rao (2002) presented pessimistic opinions about teaching English in English adopting CLT methodology. Chinese university students in her study learning English based on the

concept of CLT in China expected their teachers to speak only in English whenever possible, and tried to avoid their mother tongue in the English classroom as well. In reality, however, when asked to speak only in English in class, students showed a lack of confidence and frustration due to the gap between their perceptions about the methods and the reality of the learning context. In Korea, although a fair number of studies have been conducted on teachers' perspectives about teaching language in the target language (Park, 1996; Kim, 2002; Kim, 2002; Kim, 2002), these studies have not provided conclusive results. Thus, there still remains a controversy about using the target language as a medium of instruction in the classroom.

As seen in the existing literature, whether English should be taught only in English or not is an ongoing topic in Korea. In order to have a better understanding of how Korean secondary school English teachers themselves felt about teaching English in English based on CLT in their own classroom and provide students with a more effective English learning environment, this study examined the following two research questions:

1. What changes have Korean-speaking English teachers experienced during the six-month In-service English Teacher Training Program?
2. What obstacles do they encounter as they attempt to adopt CLT in their own classroom after the training sessions?

II. Methods

The study took place at a university in Seoul, Korea. The IETTP program was newly established to provide communicative language practices for Korean secondary school English teachers and as a result, all of their lessons were exclusively in English. The program consisted of a total of a six-month intensive English training program, a 5-month in-class training and one-month study abroad. All the instructors in the program, except for one, were native English speakers from the U.S.A. and Canada. They had prior experience teaching English for a number of years at a Korean university and a high level of professional competence. The instructors' ages ranged from early 20s to early 40s.

A total of 46, four men and 42 women, participated in the IETTP. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 50 years, with the majority in their 30s; the average age was 37.3 years old. Their experience in teaching English varied from 3 years to 25 years, with an average of over 10 years. All of the participants were teaching English in suburban secondary schools. While half of them were working in middle schools, the rest were in high schools. Out of the 46 participants, 24 had no experience learning English in an English-speaking country, whereas the rest had a three-month up to two-year learning experience abroad.

The data in this study came from several sources, including two surveys, five reflective writings that the participants had written throughout the semester, class observational notes, and interviews with the teachers during and after the training sessions. The data were analyzed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Rather than being predetermined and imposed on the data, after recursively examining all the data sources, I identified the similarities and differences within and across the data. Then, the major categories emerged to explain the central theme of this study.

III. Results

At the beginning of the training sessions, most teachers expressed that they were not able to teach English in English; however, as the training sessions continued, they gained more confidence and motivation, demonstrating that they could teach English in English if they prepared their lessons carefully. After the training sessions, many teachers expressed their frustration via email or in person about whether they should keep teaching English in English for some classes where students were not motivated to learn English in English at all. From the final reflective writing, I excerpted one example that could show how their feelings and attitudes had changed during and after the training sessions:

I thought it was impossible for me to teach English in English in my classroom. In particular, it was impossible to teach English grammar in English. It is too much, too difficult. I should explain English grammar in Korean... In addition, I thought I did not have much time to include extra materials in my teaching, except for teaching the content in the textbook. I also did not have much knowledge about how to implement CLT-based lessons, such as a content-based language instruction or task-based language instruction. (Reflective Writing)

To see the possibility that I might teach English grammar in English based on the concept of CLT and identify the issues that might arise from my lessons, I chose English grammar and content-language teaching in the English textbook for my final projects and prepared the lessons with care. In teaching the *wish past tense*, I first showed some pictures to students to facilitate students' understanding and asked them to make a complete sentence using the *wish past tense*. Then, I asked students to make three wish lists and read them aloud to their classmates and guess whose wish lists they were. After this, I played a video clip with a song, *I Wish*, and asked students to fill in the blanks. As in teaching an English poem, I first showed students a video clip with the life of a butterfly in a tree and asked students to make a story and share the story with others. Although time was an issue to prepare and complete these tasks, I felt pleased with my lessons and my students seemed to enjoy learning English. (Reflective Writing)

Although I might encounter many challenges in implementing communicative language practices in my classroom, using English only, through this training program, I gained confidence in and motivation for teaching English in English. I feel that I can do it. And I would like to be a better English teacher. (Reflective Writing)

Hi, Dr. Lee...I feel bad about this...I am not sure if I should continue to teach English in English. The other class that I teach, the students are great. They seem to be happy with CLT-based lessons and with English only lessons. Most of them are planning to go to college. I am fine with teaching English in English...However, this class, I do not know. I am not sure about this class. Most of them do not have much interest in learning English. When they are awake, they sometimes complain about why they have to learn English in English. Most of them are half asleep in class, not paying attention to my lesson. They come to school to sleep, not to study. They are not motivated to learn English at all. I really feel bad about these students. I don't know. I almost feel I have to go back to my old teaching. (Email Correspondence)

Many of my students do not want to learn English in English. They do not understand what I am talking about if I use English only. My students' English ability is very low. I try to make

CLT-based lessons based on the content in the textbook at least once a week for my class. However, it could be a disaster for my students if I use English only in my lessons. (Interview)

IV. Conclusion

The study suggests important pedagogical implications in implementing educational policies. As Park (2006) noted, although we have done many things to improve English education, including English only policy, CLT adoption, multimedia system in class, or teacher development, in order to make English education effective and successful in Korea, rather than pushing all teachers to speak English only in class or all students to learn English in English, it seems more important to ask students if they would like to learn English in English. Based on their responses, we should make both English only classrooms and English-Korean classrooms and provide them with appropriate instruction.

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About the Presenter

Given Lee, PhD, is a full-time instructor at the College English program at Seoul National University. She has extensive teaching experiences at various levels in both Korea and USA. Her research interests include second language learners' writing processes, teacher development, task-based language instruction, as well as oral classroom participation. *Email:* givenlee@hotmail.com; givenlee@snu.ac.kr