

Communicative Language Teaching Issues in South Korea

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ABSTRACT: *For nearly three decades South Korea has grappled with implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) satisfactorily in the school curriculum. This paper discusses the history of implementing CLT in the country, looks at the measures the government went through to see it's application, and discusses the reasons why such have not been successful.*

KEYWORDS: *English education, communicative language teaching, South Korea.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990's, the South Korean government began to plan measures for improved English education on the assumption that this would elevate the country's status in world economic and political activities (Li, 1998). In 1995, the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development published new guidelines in the 6th National Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education that superseded the traditional methods of grammar-translation and audio-lingual English instruction with the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT).

First conceptualized in the 1970s, CLT has grown into the prevalent approach for language instruction throughout the world. It has supplanted the outdated audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods and ushered in an era of learner-centered education. Whereas traditional foreign language approaches focused on translation, memorization, and repetition, the goal of CLT is "communicative competence" (Richards, 2006, p. 2) with focus on the needs, identity, and motivation of the learner. In this environment, DiGiulio's concept of great teaching can blossom, allowing learners to traverse the paths of "producing, empowering, and connecting" (2008, p. 116).

In the CLT classroom, the teacher functions as a facilitator to support and give feedback to the learners as they explore English (Richards, 2006). As many CLT activities are performed in pairs or groups, learners have the chance to try out language in a variety of roles and contexts that ultimately leads to the goal of developing learners' "situationally appropriate" use of English (Howard & Millar, 2009, p. 33).

II. COMPLICATIONS

CLT was devised in western countries where the style of language teaching is in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL), as opposed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) taught in South Korea and other countries where English isn't the mother tongue. Whereas learners in an ESL context have motivation for studying English, as it is the language of the country in which they immersed, EFL learners must discover other motivation. This significant difference in these two learning environments caused some researchers to question the applicability of CLT to the EFL environment (Li, 1998), in which there are not many opportunities for reading, writing, listening, or speaking English outside of the classroom.

Related to this issue is the observation that Korean EFL learners have been noted as failing to regularly make use of available English resources, which is believed by teachers to be caused by low student motivation, apathetic parents, and high-stakes testing washback (Howard & Millar, 2009). English is perceived by learners to be little more than another subject to study for examinations, as many are not interested in it as a form of communication, consequently leading teachers to educationally detrimental notions such as the idea that it is more important to teach reading comprehension than listening ability (Howard & Millar, 2009). These beliefs in turn lead to structuring syllabi and utilizing methods that are not conducive to building listening, speaking, and writing skills as these areas have customarily been of low point value or omitted from national examinations (Howard & Millar, 2009). Given that this scenario seemingly stems from a national focus on high-stakes testing, the remedy could be to either give up on CLT or to revise the tests. The former is not a viable option as the government instituted CLT due to dissatisfaction with the nation's communicative ability in English (Li, 1998), and abandoning CLT would likely result in continued usage of previous methods already disproven to impart useful communicative competence. The issues surrounding high-stakes testing have been widely acknowledged by researchers and teachers alike and exam restructuring may still be fundamental to the success of CLT in Korea.

The traditional methods of grammar-translation and audio-lingual study are still in wide use in South Korean primary and secondary education classrooms, with grammar-translation perceived as the best method to prepare high school students for university entrance examinations (Howard & Millar, 2009). This reliance on inefficient methods arises from issues of teacher ability and national examinations that award higher scores to those that study under the old methods. Learners also perceive that material taught through CLT is not applicable to high-stakes exams for high school or university admission (Howard & Millar, 2009). The learners are unfortunately correct in their assessment, but it is critical to see this not as an inapplicability of CLT to the Korean environment, rather it is a reflection of the nation's overemphasis on high-stakes testing and failure to develop tests that measure the useful aspects of studying a foreign language, such as communicative competence.

Korean EFL teachers, cognizant of CLT methodology, may have tried to put into practice communicative strategies, but approaches such as the audio-lingual method are favored as they are perceived to be more efficient for the teacher in terms of lesson preparation time and allow an easier route to task completion (Howard & Millar, 2009). Many teachers are also unsure of their own performance in English, an embarrassing fact that becomes obvious to their learners in the CLT environment (Howard & Millar, 2009). As Korea is a Confucian heritage culture, the notion of saving face is highly valued, and this may prevent Korean EFL teachers from speaking English in class. Teacher training in English, workshops on implementing CLT, and hiring better-qualified teachers are all feasible options to address these issues.

In a study conducted by Li (1998), the majority of reasons for complexities in deploying a CLT learning environment hinged on difficulties caused by the teacher. Many Korean EFL teachers believe the goal of communicative competence established by CLT and the approaches to achieve it are "incompatible with the deep-rooted socio-cultural values that contextualize contemporary teaching practices in South Korea, and counter the current expectations of many students, parents, and school administrators" (Howard & Millar, 2009, p. 49). This thinking may reflect a misunderstanding of the approaches possible through CLT, as in the CLT classroom teachers are tasked with producing lessons based on the needs of the learners (Richards, 2006). Since the country is preoccupied with high test scores, referred to as "expectations" above, teachers could still formulate lessons that focus on the grammar, structures, and vocabulary necessary to achieve exceptional exam performance through the CLT framework.

Teachers may have felt uneasy engaging their learners in the collaborative CLT context due to a fear of losing control of their learners and of the consequences from administration and colleagues for having noisy classrooms while learners engage in group and pair speaking activities prescribed by CLT (Howard & Millar, 2009). Teachers also believe that those "who focus on overall English competence rather than on examination preparation are regarded as poor teachers" (Howard & Millar, 2009, p. 48). These two fallacies of education could have disproven themselves in the initial years after the introduction of CLT. The fact they remain prevalent is troubling and could be indicative of the need for further teacher professional development.

Many Korean EFL teachers have reported that they feel competent in English grammar, reading, and writing, but that they feel inadequate with their abilities in speaking and listening and that this would impede conducting classes through CLT (Li, 1998). Their common English deficiency is readily conceptualized; many were taught English through the traditional grammar-translation method which did not impart communicative competence (Jeon, 2009). However, given the significant resources utilized by Korea in implementing CLT, it is troublesome for the learners when teachers continue educating in the same inefficient traditional methods. It would appear that what Korea needs are Korean English teachers who are fluent in English.

In 2009, the new formed Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) acknowledged the widespread lack of ability in speaking and writing English with Korean English teachers and placed native English co-teachers in classrooms nationwide as a temporary solution. 2010 saw approximately 7,000 such teachers placed (MEST, 2009). However, the influx of native English speakers was not a permanent solution, as the MEST preplanned for the program's dissolution by 2015. This coincided with a revitalizing of 2001's Teaching English in English (TEE) program, stipulating that all Korean EFL teachers must teach their primary and secondary school classes in English by 2012 (Kang, 2009). In order to prepare teachers for the TEE program and communicative teaching in general, the MEST deployed the In-service Education and Training (INSET) program in 2003 to develop the communicative competence of teachers (Yang, 2009). This six-month 600+ hour training program was offered to 1,000 teachers annually (Yang, 2009). The program initially appeared to be successful, but it has been observed by Yang (2009) that long-term English education for teachers would have a greater impact. As such, TEE too failed to produce the desired results due to limitations of teachers' English abilities and the persistent focus on high-stakes testing (Choi, 2015).

High-stakes Testing Obsession

Spring (2010) notes that "in a society organized around high-stakes tests, the school becomes a crucial institution for determining economic success" (p. 38), and thus for many Korean EFL learners the principal purpose of studying English has been for performance on national exams. The focus on high-stakes testing is so

great that “in Korea, people think your whole life depends on your CSAT [Korean College Scholastic Aptitude Test] grade” (Howard & Millar, 2009). Nationalized exam test scores are typically used for university admissions, employment, and job promotions as people expect to see measurable achievement in the scores (Jeon, 2009).

The Ministry of Education is aware that English education in South Korea is seized with high-stakes examinations and as such has been continually modifying the national curricula since the introduction of CLT in 1995. Past measures have included increasing CSAT English listening comprehension point values from 34% to 50% of the total English exam score by 2013 (MEST, 2009). However, this effort will not work to increase the communicative competence of the learners, as a high score on listening ability does not imply competence in other areas of English such as speaking and writing.

The Korean National Proficiency Test (KNPT) was proposed as a solution to the testing problem (Jeon, 2009). It was scheduled for implementation in 2014, but it never came to fruition, leaving the Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test in place. The test was supposed to be progressive by measuring communicative competence, which would inevitably elevate CLT to prominence among Korean society. Though, Savignon (2007, p. 218) expressed that “tests are seldom able to adequately capture the context-embedded collaboration that is the stuff of human communicative activity”. In other words, the communicative competence that is characteristic of CLT and essential to naturalistic communication may not be something that can be readily tested by the KNPT, and may have been the reason for its abandonment. Further, as Korea has demonstrated itself as a place where test scores are valued over demonstrable ability, learners and teachers would likely approach this new test in a familiar manner; studying for the test instead of studying for proficiency. Instead, there have been multiple changes to the English portion of the CSAT that bear little impact on Korea’s method of instruction as it relates to English.

III. FUTURE

CLT is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It requires adaptation to fit the unique needs of each country’s learning environment (Li, 1998). Jeon (2009) notes that it is important for policy makers and teacher educators to understand that curricula innovation is necessary to find the most suitable approaches to education, and to therefore make changes to reach stated goals, and that is still true today. The government has been progressive over the past decade in modifying the nation’s approach to CLT in English education and pursuing alternative testing methodology, but numerous short-lived changes seem to be the only tangible result.

With the government’s constant push for globalization, and a long-term preoccupation with elevating the nation’s image, English education has undergone many micro transformations. There have been significant hardships endured by teachers due to changing policies, and ultimately the learners because of it. It is unclear if the net result has been an increase in English competence by Korean learners. We can expect continued fine-tuning to the National Curricula for improved implementation of CLT in the classroom, more measures to ensure that Korean EFL teachers are able to utilize CLT, and continued attempts at revising testing methods to not only confirm that communicative methods are being used in the classroom, but that learners are developing communicative competence.

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