

How to prepare for an English Guidebook for Teaching English in English in South Korea

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Abstract

Since South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak raised the issue of Teaching English in English (TEE) back in 2008, there has been widespread reaction from in and out of the educational community. Critics are quick to point out that the current population of Korean English teachers are either unwilling or unable to carry out such a measure, and that the suggested five-year timeline was much too aggressive. Proponents say that teacher and student “discomfort” with English and the overall difficulty of the suggested plan are not reasons to dismiss or delay reform on such an important issue. Regardless of the debate, it seems clear that South Korean students, parents, businesses, and government leaders are all looking to improve the acquisition of English language skills in a country whose economic survival is tied so closely to Western culture and consumer trends. It is even more of a priority in light of documented deficiencies in speaking and listening skills as evidenced on South Korean TOEFL scores over the past few years.

The concept of TEE is not a new one, and a plethora of research, useful guidelines, and advice is readily available throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. As South Korea looks to its future, many people feel that TEE is the right strategy to finally solve the English puzzle. Unfortunately, there are others who have serious questions about the practical applications of immersion academics and whether they will bring about the level of English proficiency that so many Koreans desire. A thorough study of what TEE could actually bring to the Korean classroom seems necessary to clear up misconceptions and bring to a close the endless debates that only waste time, resources, and educational opportunity for the current and future generations of students.

Key words: Teaching English in English (TEE), immersion, native language, first language, second

language, teacher language, classroom language, start-up language, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), internet-based test (iBT), paper-based test (PBT), Native English Speaker Assistant Teacher (NESAT).

1. Introduction

Gojong, the 26th king of the Joseon Dynasty, introduced English language education in Korea in 1883. A school to teach and train interpreters was established under his rule, and since that time Koreans have seen an increasing value in acquiring English language skills (Jung, 1998.) In fact, English enjoys a kind of favored “second language” status in most of the world. By conservative estimates, the number of people who speak English as a first or second language is nearly half a billion, and if you include those who can use the language in even a rudimentary way, the figure jumps to somewhere near 1.5 billion—roughly 25% of the world (English Club.)

Dozens of professional organizations, including those concerned with academia, aeronautics, diplomacy, mathematics, medicine, music, science, etc., and more than 60 nations all list English as an official language (Cambridge.) Even computers, technology, and the internet are dominated by English, especially web addresses, applications, hardware, software, and keyboard design. The pervasiveness of the language is impossible to deny.

In 2008, the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI) estimated that Koreans spend about 15.8 million dollars (USD) per year on English learning—by current exchange rates, over 18 trillion won (KRW) and that figure includes everything from books and computer software to academy classes and tutoring sessions (Jeon, 2006.) Clearly, a significant portion of the population understands the importance of these particular second language skills.

During the past 50 years, the economies of individual countries have become intertwined with

one another and the concept of globalization has become so obvious that it rarely needs explanation. It is simply understood that 21st century businesses will look beyond their own borders as they attempt to sell their products to any and every potential consumer they can find, regardless of location or language preference.

Using a statistic like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) makes it quite easy to compare one country to another, but cross-referencing that same GDP figure with world languages illustrates the importance of English even further:

Teachers who implement vocabulary instruction and memorization on a daily basis are providing students with a toolkit of word choice and application for a lifetime of learning communication and literacy.

2. Creating a Guidebook for English in English

The creation of a guidebook for Korean English teachers who wish to use the TEE method would seem to be a natural and positive step. Such a guidebook would offer standardized methods and practical advice to use in the classroom, thus cultivating a more consistent instructional model and bolstering confidence among Korean teachers who may harbor some doubts about their own English ability.

The guidebook would serve many purposes:

1. To re-introduce and further develop the form and use of English for Korean teachers
2. To allow for the practice of target phrases and sentences for teachers, thus encouraging fluency and confidence
3. To illustrate how common classroom interactions can be used to their greatest advantage in the instruction of meaningful English communication
4. To help teachers identify the needs of their students in regard to the subject, and to assist in the creation of lessons that will fulfill those student needs to the greatest degree
5. To encourage teachers to use a wider range of techniques to more fully promote useful and relevant communication
6. To help teachers organize their lessons, anticipate difficulties, and arrive at a more successful outcome for themselves and their students.

Through the TEE method, the desired outcome is that students will gain skills, practice, and confidence in their individual English language abilities, and they will hopefully be more likely to

communicate using English. Toward that end, a guidebook would assist teachers in gaining an awareness of the potential situations that naturally or artificially arise in the day-to-day classroom activities and help teachers to exploit those situations to gain the most meaningful, useful, and relevant language experience and instruction for their students.

When to add TEE to the curriculum is an open subject, and there is no single answer that will be correct for every situation. Also, the parameters of TEE should be clearly defined by the school system or the individual teacher early on. Using English exclusively can take place every day, on specific days, or at a certain point in the schedule, and students need to understand when (and why) the primary language of the class is to be English and only English.

It should also be noted that the occasional use of the first language by the teacher (not necessarily the students) may be extremely helpful in certain situations, but the frequency of such incidents should be discussed and understood by the teacher and students from the outset. There cannot and should not be a consistent breakdown of the primary language of the class (English) and it should be viewed as a very bad sign if students suddenly begin speaking in their native tongue without permission. Such occurrences are obvious indications that something is wrong, and the teacher must be quick to curb such incidents by providing the necessary instruction, leadership, advice, or encouragement. Knowing how to re-direct such behavior is one of the skills that teachers should anticipate using and practice regularly so that the disruption will be minimized and eventually cease to occur at all.

Once again, if it will be more economical in terms of time management to use the native language from time-to-time to deliver (or confirm) complex instructions or to set up a certain activity, by all means it should be done. But at no time should this practice become commonplace. Such behavior would dilute the immersion process and completely undermine the TEE strategy.

The TEE method should utilize a variety of forms, including reading, study, repetition, question and answer, discussion, individual assignments, pair work, group work, and whole class activities. In addition, multimedia use in the classroom should be encouraged. Audio recordings can enhance both listening and speaking ability, and video clips can offer a basis for discussion, vocabulary development, dialogue practice, role-play situations, and other observational and developmental activities. Teachers should continue to look for new and innovative ways to make use of technology in

the TEE classroom. One suggestion is using available applications to have real-time video interactions with English-speaking students and classes from schools in other countries. Since those students will likely be unable to communicate in any language other than English, the motivation for Korean children to use their English skills will be increased.

Generally, there are two types of interaction between teachers and students in the classroom environment. During normal instruction, the teacher delivers information to the students and they receive the one-way message from the teacher. For that type of interaction in the TEE classroom, the teacher should be using accepted and well-practiced idiomatic forms of “teacher language” to provide input. A generous selection of these specialized forms would be present in any TEE guidebook so that teachers could become more comfortable and more fluent with these English sentences and phrases.

The second type of classroom interaction focuses more on the Socratic method, where the teacher acts as a facilitator of communication posing pre-planned and/or lesson-based questions to students and redirecting responses toward an ever-increasing use of words, phrases, and sentences. In the TEE guidebook, such “classroom language” would be clearly identified, developed, and listed in a variety of forms so that the Korean English teacher would have many different ways of posing questions, directing discussions, and redirecting activities so that students gain the greatest practice without feeling bored or manipulated. Interactions like these are essential to build students’ speaking skills and, if they are done effectively, their confidence will grow as well.

In similar fashion, the use of target phrases or sentences will serve as fundamental building blocks for the development of the students’ communicative skills in TEE. For example, simple phrases like, “can you” and “will I” or “would you” and “may I” naturally occur quite often in the classroom setting. Students and teachers are constantly asking each other questions that begin with these (and similar) words.

To build on this form, the teacher can use simple sentences like, “Would you please sit down?” or “Would you please open your books?” These forms illustrate the structure of an English question (beginning with the interrogative) as well as the use of the word “please” which models a certain level of decorum or proper manners. Building even further on the same form, teachers can use sentences like, “Can you tell me the answer?” or “Will you bring your homework tomorrow?” Students in turn can adopt a similar form and apply

it to a personal need by asking, “Can you please repeat that?” or “May I please use the restroom?” Thus the communication that was introduced and modeled by the instructor is both meaningful and relevant to the student.

Simple question and answer sessions can expose student to even more vocabulary and structure while they are only required to respond within their own comfort level. “Did you go to the store?” involves the interrogative structure and a commonly known destination, but the student may respond with a simple yes or no, thus reducing the fear and anxiety of communication without sacrificing the exposure to an ever increasing pool of words and situations.

Later on, the student can acquire greater development in his or her response with, “Yes, I went to the store,” or “No, I did not go this time.” Such is the nearly infinite potential in the development of English using the TEE method.

Also included in the TEE guidebook are a variety of dialogue practice models, each drawn from current, relevant, and useful communicative language that will give students important tools for expression and comprehension. These can be created for use in pairs or larger groups. Other dynamic activities, including repetition and rephrasing practice, role-play scenarios, and other types of presentations can be designed for smaller groups or the entire class. By preparing a mixture of discussion topics, written work, auditory features, and creative activities, teachers can successfully use the tools contained in the TEE guidebook to combat students’ complacency and boredom while urging them forward toward second language fluency.

3. Conclusion

Korea did not invent the TEE curriculum. It has been used in many other countries and found to be an approach that can deliver significant results. When one examines the needs of Korean students in regard to second language acquisition, especially in light of TOEFL scores that place deficiencies in speaking and listening skills in the spotlight, it is obvious that the current practices need to be re-evaluated and adjusted to arrive at a more desired outcome.

Developing a guidebook for Korean English teachers with the help of educators who have firsthand knowledge and experience of the strengths and weaknesses of the Korean educational culture seems well founded. Such a tool could offer specific assistance in improving the second language areas of greatest concern (speaking and listening) while bolstering the development of

reading and writing skills.

It is futile to continue the same educational processes while hoping for a significantly different outcome. Perhaps it is time to develop a new educational strategy in Korea like TEE. It seems to be worthy of further study.

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