

English Language Teaching in South Korea: A Route to Success?

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Abstract—This paper is an attempt to investigate the status of English language teaching (ELT) in South Korea. To do so the historical background of ELT, and the reform movement, as a measure taken by the government to boost language education in this country, have been discussed. The outcome of this measure and the philosophical underpinning of education in this country along with different issues related to language teaching, such as: learning strategies, beliefs, language ideology, and the use of technology-assisted language teaching programs have been elaborated. Attempts have been made to demystify the ELT problems in this country with the aim of alleviating the shortcomings and improving the strengths of such an educational system. Putting different pieces of the ELT puzzle in South Korea together, some of the stunting factors were recognized to be: the ideological basis of the reform movement, lack of utilizing critical pedagogy, and insufficient attempts aimed at teaching language learning strategies and technology-assisted language learning normalization. Though this paper has focused on the status of ELT in Korea, many of the raised suggestions can be utilized in other countries, in particular Asian countries with Confucian background.

Index Terms—ELT, confucianism, reform movement, language ideology, critical pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) in South Korea has a long history. English has been the first foreign language in this country since 1945 (Kaplan and Baldauf, 2003). And, it became a required subject in 1997 (Kwon, 2009). According to Kim-Rivera (2002), in 1983 the Korean government opened an English school for interpreters; thereby it contributed to the growth of English language education for the next twenty-two years. In 1905, when Korea became a Japanese protectorate, this growth was interrupted. As stated by Kim-Rivera, there were two factors which led to Korea missing opportunities for English language education between 1938 and 1945. First, when Japan engaged in war the government declared English as the language of the enemy and suppressed its use and teaching. And, second, when Japan mobilized the entire colony for the war effort, it stopped all education in Korea by 1945, including opportunities for ELT development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Reform Period

According to Kaplan and Baldauf (2003), in 1994 the Presidential Committee for Globalization Policy, acknowledging the failure of the existing English curriculum in developing students' oral proficiency, undertook a reform in ELT in Korea. Some aspects of this reform movement included the introduction of English instruction at an earlier age (especially at elementary schools, which as referred to as ELES (English language in elementary school); developing national English curriculum (including teacher training, organized multimedia facilities and standardized textbooks); and emphasizing fluency and successful communication rather than accuracy and rote memory.

B. The Reform Outcomes

According to Kwon (2006), after the ELT reform in Korea, in 2006 a research was conducted by Kwon, Boo, Shin, Lee, and Hyoun, to assess the changes taking place during ten years of ELT and to find means and measures to improve it. The results of this study, as reported by Kwon (2006) are as follows:

- 1- Advancement of academic research
- 2- Changes in curriculums, teaching materials, and teaching methods, i.e., the introduction of video, audiotapes, and CD-ROMs
- 3- Changes in teacher education and in-service training for ELES, i.e., the increase of the in-service training courses
- 4- Investigating students' perceptions and self-evaluations of English, i.e., elementary students were less confident with productive skills than with receptive skills, and with written language than with spoken language.
- 5- Investigating teachers' evaluations and perceptions of students, i.e., they were positive toward ELES.
- 6- Investigating social changes, i.e., the increase of private tutoring, ELT in kindergarten, and early study-abroad.
- 7- Investigating the effects of ELES of students' English abilities, i.e., reading, listening and writing of the ELES group's scores were significantly higher than these of the non-ELES groups.

Nevertheless, according to Kaplan and Baldauf (2003), in spite of all the efforts made, the aims of the new curriculum have not been met yet. So that still Korean students do not have communicative ability in English. This failure can be attributed to several factors, but demystifying such factors requires an understanding of important issues such as the philosophical foundation of education, learning strategies, beliefs and language ideology in this county.

C. Educational Philosophy

Investigating the status of ELT in South Korea cannot take place irrespective of the prominent role played by the dominant underlying educational philosophy, i.e., Confucian philosophy. Confucianism became the state ideology of Korea during the Choson Dynasty in 1392 (Littrell, 2006). It was brought to Korea from China during this dynasty (1392-1910). This philosophy has had strong influence for more than two thousand years on the cultures of China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan (Kim, 2004).

Confucius advocated a philosophy of learning that includes dialogue, thinking and reflecting, as well as memorizing (Rao and Chan, 2009). Kim (2007) investigated four principles of Confucianism, i.e., Emphasis on Education, Family System, Hierarchical Relationships, and Benevolence. The first principle encompasses issues such as rote learning, extreme competition, a work-play dichotomy, and a devaluation of play. The second principle imposes strict gender role expectations, rigid parent-child relationships and an overemphasis on obedience, filial piety, and loyalty. The third principle enforces unequal relationships, rigid social structure, gender role expectations, and authoritarian relationship between teachers and students. The fourth principle is related to issues such as suppression of emotion, the silence ethic, an extreme value of humility, conformity, and stigmatized eccentricity. However, the effects of Confucian philosophy have not remained steady. At the end of the Choson dynasty, when Koreans lost their national sovereignty to Japanese colonial powers in 1910, this philosophy was criticized (Hahm, 2003, as cited in Kim, 2004).

According to Shin and Koh (2005), part of America's success in ELT as compared with that of Korea is that while in America the emphasis is on individualism, in Korea the emphasis is on communitarianism, i.e., emphasizing the importance of groups or communities which is stemming from a deeply rooted Confucian philosophy emphasizing a hierarchical and patriarchal society.

D. Learning Strategies

Closely related to the educational philosophy is the issue of strategies used by the learners. There are many studies which indicate a link between cultural background and the choice of language learning strategies, e.g., Bedell and Oxford (1996); Reid (1987). In Confucian-heritage education students rely heavily on memorization (Ho, Peng, and Chan, 2001). While there are studies indicating the successful results of utilizing this strategy in some Eastern countries with Confucian thinking (Dai and Ding, 2010; Ding, 2007; Wray and Pegg, 2005), its use has been depreciated by many scholars as stunting the development of critical thinking abilities in the learners. In fact, "Theorists of *critical thinking* generally seem to be critical of approaches that are based on the mere transmission of information or blind *memorization*." (Gallagher, 1992, p. 221)

Probably such discrepancies can be demystified when the factor of 'time' is taken into account. That is, although memorization as a dominant strategy among learners with Confucian background might be fruitful, considering the amount of time spent for learning language through this strategy and comparing it with that of other strategies it does not seem very rewarding. At the same time, it should be mentioned that it is not memorization but the sole reliance on this strategy which is depreciated, since as mentioned by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), more effective learners are those who use a greater variety of strategies and also use them in ways appropriate to the language-learning task. And, less effective learners not only have fewer strategy types but also frequently use strategies that are inappropriate to the task.

The importance of learning strategies in education gets more prominent with regard to the notion of learners' autonomy and what Rogers (2003) has named 'stratopedia'. Rogers, defining this term as "teaching learners the strategies they need so that they can learn on their own" (p. 3) has referred to it as one of ten scenarios which shapes the teaching of second languages in the third millennium. Therefore, one of the measures which can be taken to boost ELT throughout the world, in general, and in Confucianism-dominant countries in particular, is teaching appropriate strategies. Consequently, it can be claimed that while implementing suggestions made by strategy studies such as Magno (2010) - which points to the stronger effect of using compensation strategies in increasing English proficiency of the Korean students - might be fruitful temporarily, to meet long-term behavioral objectives, Korea's educational reform requires consciousness raising and teaching varieties of appropriate strategies among teachers and learners respectively.

E. Beliefs

Also germane to educational philosophy is the issue of language beliefs. In language teaching, beliefs refer to "ideas and theories that teachers and learners hold about themselves, teaching, language, learning and their students" (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 52). In fact, the philosophical underpinning of education plays a key role in shaping beliefs. At the same time, for any educational reform to be successful congruence should exist between the beliefs held by students, teachers, and the government.

As far as teachers' beliefs are concerned, some rather contradictory results have been reported by different studies. For example, Yook (2010) has found such beliefs to be mostly based on the communication-oriented approaches (i.e.,

congruent with the reform). However, the limited number of teachers (N=10) participating in her study lowers the validity of her findings. Nevertheless, the fact that she has attributed the major sources of the participants' beliefs to their experiences (i.e., to overseas or domestic in-service teacher education programs) seems also to account for discrepancies reported on teachers' beliefs in different studies. Also, she has referred to mismatches among her own participants' beliefs as symptoms of a transitional stage through which ELT in Korea has been going, and not as inconsistencies and signs of major problems with the reform per se. But, according to Shin (2007), there is a lack of congruence between the government's beliefs (the reform policy) and those of teachers which refers to some problems with the reform itself. She believes that the dominant ideology embedded in the 'English-only policy' which led to the myth of the 'native speaker' (NS) as the ideal language teacher is in conflict with the beliefs held by Korean English teachers and students. According to her, while the government's ELT goals have been influenced by the discourse of globalization, those of teachers have been constructed through daily interactions with the students in the real settings (i.e., local classrooms). Therefore, part of the blame lies with globalization and its outcomes. That is, craving for 'authentic' English, and emphasizing speaking ability which are difficult for non-native speaker (NNS) teachers. According to Shin, this, in turn, led to an identity crisis in some NNS teachers who felt a sense of inadequacy and incompetence due to the pressures exerted by the 'English-only policy' which downgraded Korean teachers and legitimized NS as ideal teachers.

Closely related to teachers' beliefs are their perceptions of punishment. According to the report prepared by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (2014), some forms of corporal punishment, but not all of them, are prohibited in Korean schools. One important point is that although this punishment has been to some extent banned in this country, according to the aforementioned report, "the prohibition does not apply to "indirect" physical punishments such as forcing a child to hold painful positions, imposing punitive physical exercise, etc." (p. 3), and there are some controversy concerning the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" physical punishment. So, this punishment, to some extent, is still being implemented in Korea. Mamatey (2010) in this regard found that while the Korean teachers acknowledged some of the negative effects of corporal punishment, nevertheless most of them believed the benefits outweighed the negatives. And this in turn led them to consider corporal punishment as beneficial in managing Korean EFL classrooms—especially in classrooms with 40 or more students.

While studies pointing to the adverse effects of implementing this sort of punishment abound (e.g., Arif and Rafi, 2007), its harmful effects cannot be appropriately understood unless one investigate it in longitudinal studies or in the light of the insights provided by the "critical incident theory" and "sensitivity to initial conditions" (e.g., as referred to by Finch, 2010). According to Larsen-Freeman (1997), language acquisition resembles complex nonlinear systems and like such systems it is "sensitive to initial conditions" to the extent that a small change in the initial condition might lead to tremendous changes over time. In the same vein Finch (2010) has referred to both positive and negative effects of critical incidents, mentioning corporal punishment as one of such incidents which over time brings about adverse effects. Therefore, one piece of puzzle missing from the reform movement would be consciousness raising in Korean teachers regarding the outcomes of their system of reward and punishment which might change not only the language achievement but also the whole educational future of a learner. What is important in Mamatey's study (2010) is that teachers' beliefs regarding the efficacy of corporal punishment were shaped by the educational system factors rather than the belief that such punishment helped their students. Consequently, changing the belief of the whole educational systems and teachers should take place in this country through raising awareness of critical incidents and their possible outcomes. The importance of corporal punishment has also been referred to by Shin and Koh (2005) who comparing ELT in America and Korea have attributed part of America's success to educators in this country who have developed numerous behavior management strategies in order to create positive learning environments, but Korean educators seem to have developed few disciplinary tactics and rely heavily on the punitive behavior management system.

As regards learners' beliefs, Shin (2007) found that not only teachers but also students did not consider being NS as the best teacher qualification. She referred to a mismatch between ELT beliefs held by different groups especially between teachers' and students' and those of government's as part of the reform's ideological problems. Resorting to Robertson's (1995) notion of 'glocalization', which is different from that the common understanding of the concept of globalization, Shin (2007) tried to solve controversies of ELT in Korea. According to Robertson (1995), there is a constant relationship between globalization and localization, i.e., "globalization ... increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole." (p. 40). Therefore, Robertson, recommended replacing globalization with what he termed glocalization. Shin (2007), believes that although the attempt to include the global inevitably led global textbooks to exclude the local, such books can be considered as an "emancipatory site when successfully glocalized." (p. 84)

F. Language Ideology

The other issue which is related to educational philosophy is language ideology. It refers to "a set of concepts, doctrines and beliefs that forms the basis of a political, educational or economic system." (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 269). Ideology and language teaching are closely related to the extent that some scholars such as Kumaravadivelu (2006) believe them to be inseparable. In fact, Kumaravadivelu has looked at "language" from the three vantage points of; language as system, language as discourse, and language as ideology.

One of the foundational structures of any classroom learning and teaching operation, according to Kumaravadivelu is interactional activities. Kumaravadivelu (2003) has considered three interrelated dimensions of interaction, i.e., interaction as a textual activity, interaction as an interpersonal activity, and interaction as an ideational activity. The first focuses on formal concepts, the second on social context, and the third on ideological content. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), while the first and second dimensions both fail to recognize language as ideology, the third dimension does so by empowering learners to construct their individual identity. In fact, "it focuses on ideas and emotions the participants bring with them, and its outcome is measured primarily in terms of pragmatic knowledge/ability." (p. 66). This often neglected dimension is important since "language is not simply a network of interconnected linguistic systems; rather, it is a web of interlinked sociopolitical and historical factors that shape one's identity and voice." (p. 72). Therefore, interactional modifications should provide the learners also with some of the tools required for identity formation and social transformation (Kumaravadivelu). The new Korean 'English-only policy' and the notion of the 'NS as the ideal language teacher' brought about by the reform, as mentioned by Shin (2007), are not completely in accord with Kumaravadivelu's idea. According to Kumaravadivelu (1999, p. 472),

"language teachers can ill afford to ignore the sociocultural reality that influences identity formation in and outside the classroom nor can they afford to separate learners' linguistic needs and wants from their sociocultural needs and wants. Negotiation of discourse meaning and its analysis should ... also take into account discourse participants' complex and competing expectations and beliefs, identities and voices, fears and anxieties."

Therefore, such a task probably will be much easily handled by an NNS English teacher who most probably is more informed of the students' culture, expectations, beliefs, identities, and anxieties and with whom learners can identify more easily.

The importance of the notion of identity in language teaching has also been referred to by McKay (2011) according to whom, investigating the second learners' identity has recently gained momentum in SLA theories. Therefore, attention is turned towards the ways school discourses can position language learners within the educational context, and, give them a specific identity. As mentioned by her, language use today is often not just English but a mixture of a variety of languages that underline the speaker's identity and proficiency. Therefore, the sole use of English and excluding L1 in classes is not recommended. This idea has also been acknowledged by insights provided by the World Englishes (WEs), and multi-competence theory (Cook, 2008).

G. Critical Pedagogy

As mentioned before, awareness of language ideology will provide deeper insights into ELT. To implement this end (Kumaravadivelu, 1999) has proposed what is called critical classroom discourse analysis (CCDA). In fact, "The relationships between ideology, language, and discourse are a central focus of critical theory and critical linguistics." (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 269). The primary function of CCDA is "enabling teachers to reflect on and to cope with sociocultural and sociopolitical structures that directly or indirectly shape the character and content of classroom interaction." (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 73).

According to Kumaravadivelu, critical pedagogy, influenced by the pioneering thoughts of Paulo Freire, has considered classroom as an ideological site and by doing so it tries to empower education and shed light on the way power relations work within the society. This aspect is not only pedagogically but also ideologically important, especially regarding the relationship between ELT and colonialism which has been referred to by Pennycook (2007). According to Pennycook, in many respects contemporary ELT reproduces colonial relations of Self and Other. Therefore, developing critical awareness of the neo-colonial impact of English and encouraging resistance to this impact in learners would be one of the measures which can be taken against such a threat. In the same vein Fairclough (1995) believes that language learners can learn to contest such practices only if the relationship between language and power is made explicit to them.

As an example of studies in this regard one can point to Lee (2010, October) who tried to explore ways in which ideologies related to English are imposed on or appropriated by Korea's language policies, academia, and the media. Through discussing the representations of English across different discourse genres, Lee tried to show the ways through which language ideologies surrounding English are locally reproduced and the ways through which discursive output of these ideologies contributes to reinforce the hegemony of English in South Korea.

As another example, one can refer to Prey (2005) who referred to YBMISi-sa, the giant in the Korean ELT and English publishing industry. As mentioned by Prey, it was founded over 40 years ago, and grew up under the "neo-imperial" conditions determined by the USA after the Korean War. Since then, YBMISi-sa has been in close relationship with the Americans, thereby influencing ELT in Korea.

The other way to boost ELT, which is in line with critical pedagogy, as proposed by Noah (1973, as cited in Shin and Koh, 2005) is cross-cultural studies, i.e., making a comparison between different cultures, including one's own culture with that of others. According to Noah, "a cross-cultural study allows individuals not only to investigate various values and norms within each country, but also helps individuals appreciate the cultural differences and to increase understanding among countries on the basis of the observed knowledge." (p. 1)

H. Technology and ELT in Korea

Understanding the status of ELT in Korea also requires an investigation of technology-based language teaching in this country since Korea is one of the sources of management and technology transfer in Asia (Graddol, 1997). Considering this point widespread employment of and research on technology-based ELT is expected to be seen in this country. However, research in this area is not advanced, for instance, CALL, though being widely used, is still academically under-researched (O'Donnell, 2006) and teachers still have difficulty using it (Park and Son, 2009).

Another related issue is the use of Internet-assisted language teaching (IALT). "Since the early 1990s, the Korean Ministry of Education has supported and provided primary and secondary schools with multimedia computers, software programs and Internet connections to encourage the use of computers and the Internet for education in Korea." (Shin and Son, 2007, pp. 1-2). The benefits gained from IALT have been referred to by many scholars (e.g., Murray and McPherson, 2004).

It should be mentioned that according to Davis's (1989), "Technology Acceptance Model", learners' internal perception about a technology program will determine their intention to use the program or not, and this, in turn, will lead to different learning outcomes. Considering Korea as one of the leading countries in computer technology, there is a vast opportunity for teachers to benefit from this technology. Nevertheless, in spite of the introduction of technology into the reform movement, and the positive attitudes of most Korean EFL teachers' toward the use of the IALT, about half of the teachers in the study conducted by Shin and Son (2007) did not use and/or had difficulties in using the Internet in their classroom. According to them, providing appropriate computer facilities with reliable Internet and IALT classes for teachers can remove such difficulties. Conducting a research in the same area, Park and Son (2009) referred to factors such as: as lack of time, insufficient computer facilities, rigid school curricula and textbooks, lack of administrative support, teachers' limited computer skills, knowledge about computers and beliefs and perceptions of CALL as factors significantly influencing teachers' decisions on the use of CALL. Overall, it seems that CALL and IALT normalization and training classes are missing from the reform.

I. Reform's Methodology

While reform recommended utilization of communication-oriented approaches to ELT, there are some problems implementing these approaches, and in particular CLT in Korea. First of all, it should be mentioned that, as acknowledged by Spada (2007) there are some confusion in the definitions and implementation of CLT which has resulted in a variety of myths and misconceptions. For example, while the 'English-only policy' in the reform recommends excluding L1 in many grades, Spada has referred to L1 avoidance as one of the CLT myths. Moreover, excluding L1 in class and transferring the teaching job to NS teachers will result in neglecting the expertise of NNS teachers who, according to Cook (1999), have the advantage of being bilingual and sharing the same L1 with students. Also, as mentioned by Peirce (1989), CLT does not have the ability to empower students to transform the status quo. Therefore, it often results in "the empty babble of the communicative language class" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 311).

In fact, according to Hu (2002), even many Korean teachers who claimed to be CLT followers, were often "paying lip-service" (p. 94), i.e., while they claim to be following CLT, they still stick to their traditional methods. It should be mentioned that "language- learning in Korea is culturally specific, and cannot be described by theories originating in other learning environments" (Finch, 2011, p. 60). Therefore, the methodological achievements by other countries and cultures should be adapted to those of the countries where it is going to be implemented. For instance, Finch in this regard, while advocating strongly the benefits of utilizing TBLT has recommend this method to be adapted to its Korean context.

III. CONCLUSIONS

While the status of ELT in South Korea has been improved to some extent by the reform movement, it still has not reached its full potentials. And although some scholars have provided suggestions to improve the status quo, there are still many controversies concerning ELT in this country. In fact, many of the suggestions made are still reflecting the ideological bases of the reform, some of which, according to this paper, are responsible for stunting the growth of ELT in this country. For example, the employment of more NS teachers as referred to by Kwon (2006), or the methodology recommended by the reform, and in particular CLT, have been discussed to lead to what Shin (2007) has referred to as an identity crisis in some teachers.

The other issue stunting the ELT growth was recognized to be lack of utilizing critical pedagogy. In fact, critical pedagogy suggests that education should aim at developing "critical thinking by presenting the people's situation to them as a problem so that they can perceive, reflect, and act on it" (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p. 259). As an example of studies in this regard one can point to Shin and Crookes (2005) whose investigation showed that contrary to the stereotypical belief considering East-Asian students as passive and non-autonomous, Korean students were by no means resistant to critical pedagogy, and depicted the ability to handle and generate critical dialogue in English. Therefore, the ground is ready for fostering critical pedagogy.

Moreover, the advantages of utilizing this pedagogy are not confined to boosting ELT, since it can also act as an anti-colonialism movement. Also the other advantage of utilizing critical pedagogy can be claimed to be what Kumaravadivelu (2006) has been referred to as "Liberatory autonomy" in language learners. While fostering autonomy has been one of the very important goals of many ELT endeavors, "liberatory autonomy", according to Kumaravadivelu

goes beyond the narrow view of learner autonomy by empowering learners to be critical thinkers. In fact, it actively seeks to help them recognize socio-political obstacles that prevent them from realizing their full human potential. And by doing so it provides them with the necessary tools to overcome such obstacles.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy by enabling Korean language learners to gain insight into their Confucian philosophy of education can help them to understand and boost their educational system. According to Kim (2007), there are elements within Confucianism that in many ways have prevented creativity to flourish to its full potentials and the best creative techniques or the strongest creative personality cannot solve this problem per se. But Koreans can solve this problem through self-evaluation of their culture and increasing their awareness of the limitations of their philosophical underpinning. Through such awareness people will be empowered to make choices for an environment that nurtures creativity. And since education on the whole, and ELT in particular, are closely related to creativity fostering such knowledge is important.

Teaching appropriate learning strategies, in line with the notion of 'strategopedia', raised by Rogers (2003), and adapting teaching methods to Korean culture, as suggested by Finch (2011), and technology-assisted language learning normalization are among other suggested ways to boost ELT in Korea.

Overall, it should be mentioned that in spite of the shortcomings, there is much room for ELT improvement in Korea. In fact, there are many issues which make ELT perspective quite rosy in this country. In this regard one can point to changes in the attitudes of many Korean teachers towards corporal punishment. Also there are studies indicating Korean students not to be resisting critical pedagogy (e.g., Shin and Crookes, 2005). Moreover, the advanced technology in this country paves the way for the ELT's future success. Therefore, should a nationwide effort be made to alleviate the problems, there will be lots of hope that ELT will thrive in this country even at a more rapid pace considering the hard working characteristic of Koreans, and their emphasis on education which stem from their Confucian Philosophy.

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