Groping for a new English teaching strategy

Jae Ik Moon

College of Liberal Arts, Kangnam University, Yong-In, Republic of Korea

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Abstract

By the time a student reaches college, he or she has studied English for approximately ten years. As if that were not sufficient, English education continues for up to two additional years in college. The outcome of these years of arduous toil produces results that are far below expectations. Hence, English falls among students’ most loathed subjects. The clear villain for this paltry progress is not the students but a victimising system. From the first year of junior high school through the freshman or sophomore years of college, English is monotonously taught with almost no variation whatsoever. The curriculum consists mostly of grammar and translation, in that order. Many teachers force rote memorisation of grammar on hapless kids while not even realising the proper methods of language acquisition. Because English in Korea begins in earnest in junior high school, pupils should first be exposed to spoken English, with an emphasis on listening and speaking, duly followed by reading and writing. More specifically, only after reviewing systematic structure and syntax should college students focus on reading and writing.

Keywords: English teaching strategy; Systematic structure and syntax; Rhetoric; English’s four skills; Grammatical; Logical; Intellectual; Critical; Reading; Writing; Thinking; Appreciating; Understanding

Introduction

Korea’s first English teaching institute, the Dongmunhak School, was founded in 1883 to train government interpreters and translators. Since then, English literacy has climbed with Koreans’ interest in the language. The purposes of learning the “world language” and attitudes and behaviours toward these efforts vary among individuals and groups. The camps of English pedagogy in Korea are largely divided among writing versus speaking and refinement versus practicality.

Typically, Koreans study English in public schools and private academies for over ten years. English-language mass culture bombards them. Regrettably, many still cannot converse with foreigners or write letters in English. The push for more practical English derives from this sobering truth. However, given the heavy emphasis on pattern practice, the adage that “speaking makes us blind, while writing makes us deaf” suggests that Korean English students go blind first. The ideal of learning other languages is to gain knowledge through foreign books. Imagine learning
Chinese through conversation, instead of books. We could “interpret” Chinese without ever encountering the ideas, literature, or philosophy of the “Middle Kingdom.” Moreover, foreign language education inevitably lags behind developments in mass communications.

I believe that language education must focus on the written word. Meeting other peoples in their own language matters less than reading their best ideas. English education must focus on “how” and “what”; i.e., HOW to use audio-lingual and meaning-oriented methods, and HOW to teach real writing and communicative skills for self-expression, with WHAT curriculum and WHAT textbooks?

Values

Self-reflection in college English education is urgent. We are bewildered, with no easy answers in sight. The fundamental issue itself requires reanalysis. College English is a basic requirement for most majors with the goal of students grasping world cultures through language and improving on middle and high school basic learning. However, we must refine our aims to achieve them. Undoubtedly, English contributes practically and culturally to education. However, should basic college English requirements stress practicality or cultural literacy? Of course, these values overlap; good teaching is both practical and cultural. The real problem is that the potential for new methods is curtailed before students even set foot on college campuses.

With limitless time and money, we could teach the four key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In practice, these are only intentions. We tilt toward written English at the expense of spoken English, while glossing over practicality. Practical uses, such as listening to lectures in the language, communicating comfortably with foreigners, and holding academic discussions, sound reasonable but stray far from reality.

In contrast, cultural education interprets other civilisations to widen areas of study. To bestow culture, English requires content, which no language exists apart from. Colleges know that students learn English pattern drills in middle and high school, and students’ interests have diverged and fluctuated along the way. To present deeper contents requires sentences with drawn out explanations of American and British mannerisms which preclude one-track language skills and neglect practical value. However, if readings present complex contents that tax comprehension, cultural enrichment is further lost.

Practical English ability smoothly fills the needs of national defence, industry, academia, etc., while cultural knowledge directly broadens views and spirituality through the major texts of all times and nations. Practical training might sharpen mental acuity, which helps in mathematics, philosophy, logic, and other subjects. However, curricula that neglect cultural education leave us with mere vocational training, diluting the meaning of a university education. In one recent class, for example, no student had ever heard of Napoleon. Indeed, the students seemed to know almost no Korean history either, at least in English. Bequeathing culture, a civilising force, is the university’s raison d’etre. Most true professional education occurs during the career itself. The cultural enlightenment obtained in college is timeless and priceless.

Indiana University's Professor Parker stated, “If cultural education, for example, is not only to reach out for new knowledge but also to broaden and train one's mind, training one's mind is mainly by speech/language training.” While foreign language education might not increase inherent intelligence, knowing other languages expands one's scope of learning. Even our mother tongue can then be observed more objectively and used more accurately. To read, write, listen, or speak only one language limits a person's vision and marks one as less educated. Although one might comprehend other cultures through music or other art and materials that have been interpreted or translated into Korean, he or she is still denied the cultural richness that language alone expresses. Exploring other cultures only indirectly must necessarily be shallow.

To know another language is to partake of another culture authentically. Imagine two people who seek to know Korea. One enjoys great knowledge of the “Land of the Morning Calm” but speaks no Korean. The other has not studied our history or culture but speaks Korean well. With which of these people could we truly grow closer, and which is most empowered to comprehend contemporary Korea? To be locked in a foreign language keeps us foreign. This phenomenon might be why some worry that foreign language education harms our national spirit. However, the objective of English education in college is to broaden us through participation in another culture.

The practical nature of English remains. Clearly, we choose this language over others due to its widespread impact. Despite the focus on the cultural heights of English, its utility is not lost. Indeed, teaching English-speaking culture without advancing practical ability would be problematic. Not knowing which field students will work in after graduation argues against
teaching business English, science English, textual exposition, politics, etc. When we do teach them, students obtain “vocational” rather than cultural education.

If English were a dead language, and the English-speaking world’s influence had waned, studying English would have less appeal. However, some colleges would still teach English, as they do Latin or Old Korean, for scholarly value. The utility of English over other tongues motivates us.

**Targets**

Middle-school, high-school, and college English all target the same skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, we still fail to instill these four basics adequately. As George Perren noted, the gulf between class goals and true outcomes stymies class quality, hurts student morale, and exhausts teachers. Therefore, realistic goals are crucial. In speaking and writing, the main aims in middle- and high school are “the ability to understand and speak everyday English,” and these goals might be acceptable for college too.

One question revolves around the meaning of “ability.” An ability to debate academically in English sounds ideal, but this outcome is unlikely. The reality is that most undergraduates have no need for such proficiency. Given their true aims, lofty targets with no consideration of time, money, and available resources are only daydreams.

Writing and speaking are essential to most students, in both numbers of likely future opportunities and in broadening the students’ outlook. E.V. Gatenby’s criticism that a blind focus on reading evidences a teacher’s lack of ability, concern and imagination is well taken. Yet at the college level, this criticism might not always be accurate. Korean undergraduates tend to speak some English. They thus need reading practice.

John B. Carrol advocated the need for tests that measure the relative contributions of listening comprehension and speaking to reading skills, as well as cost-effective oral approaches for those who only desire reading skills in their major, given time, effort, and resource constraints. He argued that basic speaking skills are sufficient to attain relatively advanced reading skills, which contrasts with the view of mainstream linguists that speaking must precede other language learning because verbal communication is the inherent purpose of human language. If the main aim is reading, middle- and high school-acquired English might accomplish this goal. However, the results of such tests cannot be predetermined.

**Essence**

Edward M. Anthony critiqued a number of ambiguous terms, particularly “Approach,” “Method” and “Technique,” among a slew of predicates denoting an array of English teaching practices. In his breakdown, “Approach” means the fundamental, complementary assumptions of foreign language education. Any general plan to affect “Approach” is called “Method.” Consequently, many methods exist for a single approach; i.e., many roads lead to Rome. Finally, “Technique” refers to tactics actually used in classes. Based on these ideas, the present paper posits reading as essential to college English study and subsumes the following assumptions into an overarching goal termed “Reading Approach.”

First, the common sense formula that confers equal importance on primary phonetic language elements need not always be true (modern linguistics prioritises speaking over writing in language learning based on the assumption that sounds are primary elements, and letters secondary, because human language is composed of sounds). The rationale of the present paper is that language is not only how we communicate but also the medium for passing on humankind’s amassed knowledge and technology to current and future generations.

Writing, which is currently deemed rather secondary or even peripheral, transcends time and space and carries on knowledge and technology. As such, writing skills are vital to Korean language programs. Of course, oral language learning, which the vast majority of learners desire, is also indispensable.

Second, one assumption is that triggering language by listening and speaking is more effective in oral approaches and even for the acquisition of reading. Nada’s empirical study of the order in which infants learn their mother tongue showed that listening comes first. This paper notes that reading comes easier than speaking to those who primarily desire reading skills and to experienced learners whose linguistic flexibility has faded. This pattern can be observed constantly, everywhere, with no need for studies.

Thus, reading should be our priority. In most cases, we find that “utility” encourages reading. Frankly, in this sense, “utility” means the increased income students expect, resulting from the capacity to read English texts in their majors. Hence, avoiding arcane textbook styles, usage, and vocabulary is needed, even if the inherent uniformity of textbooks cannot span the diversity of majors. Students read with the goal of boosting future earnings. Therefore, language
education must offer more than literary appreciation. Students need fresh choices in history, anthropology, culture, and current trends, while avoiding esoteric literary works fraught with abstruse styles, usages, and vocabulary.

An additional improvement to Korean English study would be to publish secondary teaching materials which focus on structure and syntax for those who have not mastered basic grammar in high school. Granted, remedial materials must not completely consume study time. However, some such teaching resources are called for. An “English reading clinic” could create effective materials (while avoiding the monotonous repetition of high school-level work to spare students’ time, energy and morale) that are based on test results for freshmen English classes to improve diagnostics and remedy minor weaknesses. To those unfamiliar with such concepts as “reading clinics,” “diagnostic tests” and “treatment based on diagnostic results” this idea might sound unsystematic and overoptimistic. Nevertheless, we must attend to urgent needs, rather than heated discussions of the pros and cons of linguistic and psychological trends, methodologies, learning theories, etc.

Methods

Foreign language teaching, similar to other skills, teaches reading and comprehension at the same time and in the same ways that native speakers learn. Translating obstructs this process and is thus deemphasised. Methods without this particular drawback exist:

1. Native speakers and teachers who speak English as well as natives can paraphrase complex sentences and ask questions that deepen understanding. The acquisition of such skills undoubtedly occurs, but in practical terms, might not be possible for teachers or students in general because such skills involve advanced speaking and listening.
2. In place of speaking and listening, advanced classes can use “yes/no,” “informative,” and “multiple-choice” questions and allow only English–English dictionaries to improve reading comprehension. This approach, too, has downsides. Simple “true–false” or “multiple-choice” questions let learners guess answers with little real knowledge of the questions, while “informative questions” can hinder correct answers due to the discrepancy between the students’ recognition and production capabilities, despite good comprehension.

English–English dictionaries are recommended due to differences in denotations or connotations (i.e., cultural differences between English and Korean usage). However, the extent to which English and Korean vocabulary differ can be so unfathomable that consulting an English–Korean dictionary is inevitable. The smaller the difference in common meaning, the quicker the word can be looked up. Moreover, given English words proximal in meaning to their Korean counterparts, students who lack keen understanding of the language ultimately misinterpret English–English dictionaries and feel baffled and inundated by excess definitions. The most effective strategy might be to use English–English and English–Korean dictionaries in tandem.

Steps

English education in Korea introduces advanced foreign cultures through listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while unlocking Korean culture to the world. These aims are not challenged here. Rather, more sophisticated strategies in middle-school, high-school and college might better achieve these goals. Middle schools should emphasise spoken English as the basis for high schools to enhance speaking and reading skills, while colleges should enrich reading and writing. In practice, college English education seems simply to extend or repeat high school English. Current grammar– and translation-oriented teaching methodologies in middle and high school are also adopted in college teaching, despite the importance of writing to self-expression.

Because even listening, speaking and reading skills might not necessarily lead to writing skills, and global access to Korean knowledge and experience is a goal, the near absence of writing in class needs a remedy. One recent freshman class, for example, was able to say virtually nothing about the Korean War in English. Their struggles to organise and impart such complex ideas were understandable. Guided composition might help them.

While studying grammatically accurate English sentences seems sufficient, sets of simple sentences are not paragraphs, much less composition. Logically organised, topic-based paragraphs do not readily derive from speaking or reading. Composition students analyse and review model paragraphs for key sentences, issues, and conclusions. Ideally, students learn organisation, style and contents almost by heart. Then, similar topics are presented with the assignment to write paragraphs following the models. This method is among the fastest in helping students grasp the “paragraph” concept and embed writing skills.
Conclusions

Korea’s middle and high school English education goals can be summarised as follows: (1) thinking in English; (2) listening and speaking; (3) reading and writing; and (4) knowledge of English-speaking cultures (i.e., customs, traditions, and daily life). These goals are related and comprise the overall program.

To the best of my knowledge, the Education Ministry has never issued comprehensive, separate regulations for college English. Consequently, higher-level education conforms to past practices in addition to slight changes to accommodate the latest English education theories. Colleges have proposed the following goals for English as a liberal arts subject: (1) reading contemporary English articles and textbooks in students’ majors; (2) effective interpersonal writing and speaking; and (3) cultural awareness through English texts. English remains a *sine qua non* for career opportunities and even basic employment and is critical to current and future academic performance. Ultimately, for one reason or another, virtually all students still need English.

The reading of current publications from advanced nations and historically significant classics should be more heavily emphasised. Writing and speaking lessons for day-to-day communication should be enhanced through basic skills cultivated in middle and high school. However, today’s liberal arts classes have not diverged from the translation-oriented lessons and lopsided methods described above. Calling these methods balanced would be farfetched.

The most practical, efficient skills remain listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To reiterate, reading should be prioritised. How to encourage reading is another matter. We lack any meticulous and elaborate teaching methodology to achieve this. Devising effective formulae for all students regardless of their educational milieus is troublesome. Any scheme must satisfy wide-ranging individual linguistic capabilities, goals in learning the language, scopes and validities of teaching plans, class sizes, hours allowed for language learning, and availability of learning materials.

Foreign languages are increasingly vital. This writer posits two fundamental methods of learning, which may be characterised as Reading versus Rhetorical Approaches. The first stresses reading to access the wealth of knowledge in specific or broader domains beyond our mother tongue. The second emphasises rhetoric; i.e., the study of effective, persuasive language.

English fundamentals developed in middle and high school can lead college freshmen and sophomores toward achievement of the key skills. Translation-oriented teaching, the basis of English education across middle schools, high schools and colleges, needs recalibration. Middle schools should stress speaking and writing; high schools should stress reading and writing; and colleges should stress rhetoric, which imparts writing principles. Students learn rhetoric by discovering, organising, and expressing ideas through analysis of superb examples with the ideal of creating prose of equal quality.

Our ultimate goals are to help students reach the following competencies: (1) writing grammatical, logical papers; (2) reading English intellectually and critically at a reasonable speed; (3) thinking logically based on true premises; and (4) appreciating great ideas, past and present. College reading and writing ought to diverge from middle and high school English courses where students merely write and interpret sentence fragments.

Further reading