

# Teaching English in a Korean High School

## —An Experiment

Dale A. Enger

I would like to begin on a personal note. Since 1958, for a span of 24 years, with some interruptions, I have been deeply involved in English language education in Korea. I started as an instructor in the English department of Dong-A University in Pusan in 1958, and later moved to Seoul where as a Fulbright grantee I lectured at Seoul National University (College of Education), at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, at Sunkyun-kwan University, and at various other places for nearly a decade. For a number of years, also, I represented the Fulbright Commission at conferences, seminars, workshops, and training institutes in virtually every area of Korea. During this time I formed a lot of strong attachments and friendships in the Korean academic community. I have now returned to Korea after a six-year absence, and I know many of my former colleagues are wondering why I am teaching at an undistinguished high school in a provincial Korean city.

I have a very serious reason for doing so. For many years I have been advising English teachers in Korea, and teaching prospective English teachers, as to the methods and materials that they ought to be using in their classrooms. Yet it has been many years, nearly twenty, since I myself have faced students in a secondary school setting. This experience in a Korean high school I see as a personal re-validation, to myself if to no one else, of my credentials, a way of assuring myself that what I believe and have been telling others for all these years really works in the Korean classroom and is not all nonsense.

I am, further, using this experience in an experimental fashion, to try out approaches to teaching English that I believe and have long believed can be effective, utilizing either native speakers or Korean English teachers in the large, heterogeneous classes that are typical of Korean secondary schools. I started out, years ago, rather ignoring the fact that teachers have to deal with upwards of sixty students in a class, these students possessing a full range of natural intelligence, language learning capacity, and levels of preparation in their previous education for the tasks being presented to them. They also differ widely in their motivation, and in the extent to which they see English as something likely to be of use to them and therefore something that they should apply themselves to. Originally, and naively, I tended to ignore these facts. The advice I was giving teachers was good, but was appropriate for small, homogeneous classes. My first experience in teaching in a

Korean high school, briefly, in the last 1950s, disabused me. I was no longer naive, but I did become somewhat pessimistic. There were things that could be done to make the system somewhat better: English teachers could improve their own ability in English; textbooks could be written that contained more “real” English of a level and content likely to appeal to Korean adolescents, and so on. But for a number of years my pessimism led me to think that without substantial reduction in class size and without homogeneous grouping of students, no real or substantial improvement was likely.

And I had given up, for the most part, advising Korean teachers, academics, and officials on how the system could be improved, because virtually all advice has been met with this response: “What you say sounds good and is undoubtedly true. We should do that. But we can’t. Our classes are too large. We cannot group homogeneously. We cannot speak English in the classroom. We have to teach just the textbook. We have to teach for the entrance examination.” And so on. The entire system, in fact, has seemed to be massively impenetrable to any significant kind of change.

But yet it must change. It must change radically. And the changes must come, I think, in the relatively near future. I am not thinking in this regard in terms of Olympic fever. The Olympics will come and go in the twinkling of an eye and everything will be as if it never happened. The demand for change comes, rather, from Korea’s changing position in the world. Korea is becoming a small but vital and important economic power, with relationships not to just one or two countries, but with dozens. More than ever before Korea’s leaders, in every field of endeavor, must make themselves capable in English. The schools must stop making excuses, must find ways to effectively teach English, for if they do not, Korea will lose.

This problem has been on my mind for more than a few years, and finally this year I decided to go back into a Korean secondary school and see what if anything could be done.

This paper is a preliminary report, in non-rigorous fashion, of what my experience has been like for a twelve-week teaching period. It is experimental not in a laboratory sense, but in the sense that I am trying out some techniques and approaches that I have thought for several years would be effective. I am simply trying them out and observing their effect on my students, seeing how the students react and respond.

*The Setting.* I am, to have it on record, teaching what the school calls “English Conversation(영어회화)” to the second year students at Sooncheon Commercial High School, in Sooncheon City, Chunnam. There are nine sections of second year students with an average of 58 students in each section. I teach each section twice a week. As far as I am concerned I am not teaching “English Conversation”—I don’t even know, really, what that is supposed to be. I am teaching the English language.

Sooncheon Commercial High School, it should go without saying, is not a first rank school. There are bright, alert, intelligent boys in each of my classes, but for the

most part the boys are of average ability or below. Some are substantially below average. Many of them are, in addition, often too tired to really apply themselves to classroom tasks, for they are farm boys from the areas surrounding Sooncheon city, and have farm tasks to perform outside of school, especially at this time of year.

I state all of this to make that point that I am not dealing with privileged high achievers in a prestige school.

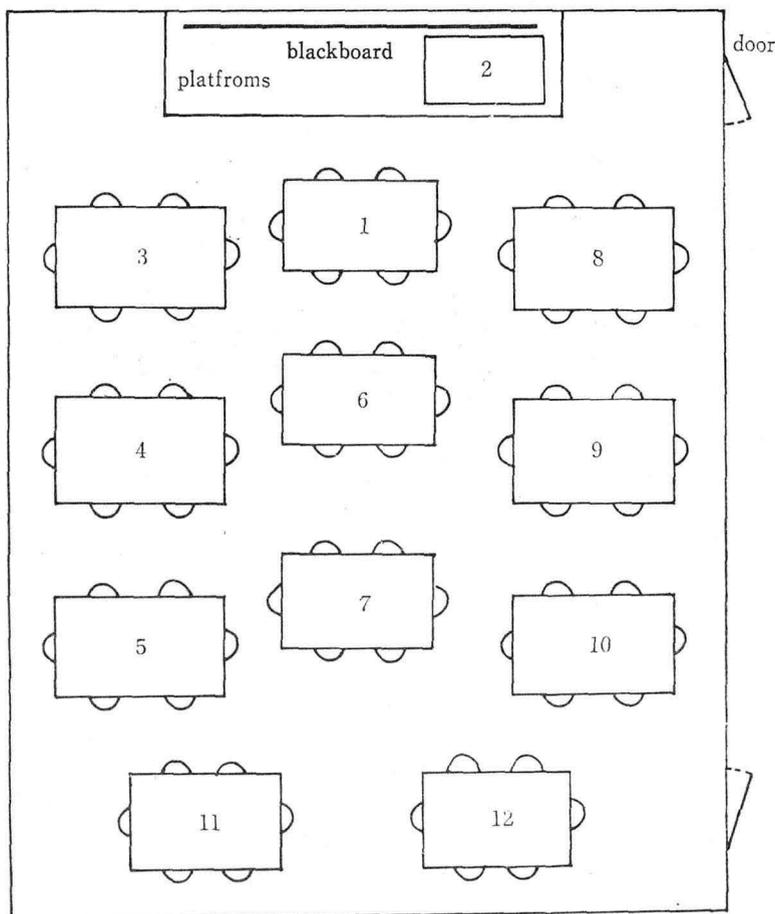
*Classroom Organization.* I determined as a necessary part of what I wanted to do in the classroom, that the classes should be divided into groups for particular kinds of group activities. I assumed that there would be resistance to this from the school on the grounds, perhaps, that Korean students would not respond to group work, or at least that it would be expensive to implement. The school responded immediately to my request, however, and in a matter of a hour had equipped my classroom with small tables, ten of them, each capable of seating six students. The school did this at very little expense by rounding up from a storage place on campus some old style teachers desks, a type with which we are all familiar, each being about 1 meter by 2 meters, having two small drawers. With these desks in my classroom and another on the podium in front of the blackboard for display purposes, my classroom looks like this (See figure 1).

With six boys at each desk the room is in fact somewhat crowded, but there is enough space between all tables so that I can thread my way from one to the other with a fair amount of ease.

*The Beginning Situation.* The first four weeks of class I did not in fact attempt to have the students do group work. We worked instead as a class on pronunciation and on learning, pretty much by rote and for purposes of working on pronunciation, on some simple identification language. I wanted the boys to be able to say things like "My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I live in Sooncheon(or Gurai or Bulkyo, or Ssangam...) with my mother and father and my (2) brothers and my sister. I am a (17) (18) year old second year student at Sooncheon Commercial High School. I enjoy playing baseball, and I like music, travel and reading."

We also during the first couple of weeks worked on the English number system (These are commercial high school students, remember. Some of them in the future might have a real and pressing need for the English number system.), and on some current "chitchat": Did you see the baseball game on TV last night? What game? The game between Japan and Korea.

I had two purposes in presenting and exercising this material. I used it first of all, as I have mentioned, to work on pronunciation. I was not yet really concerned with their ability to handle the grammatical structures involved in this material, though as second year high school students, in their fifth year of English study, they should be able to handle it (It is one of the irrationalities of the present system, however, that even after



1. teacher's desk
2. desk on platform, for display purposes
- 3~12. students tables, each with six chairs. Table 11 is used only when all students are present. Otherwise it is pushed back into the corner.

Fig. 1.

five years of study, no one expects students to handle *any* level of English structure).

Second, I was using the material to try to judge where they were in their English learning, for evaluative purposes, that is.

In this regard, I found myself very quickly in a state of shock. Things are in a much worse state than I ever imagined. I knew that middle school students were learning just a little English not very well, and that they learned a lot more in high school even more badly. But after two weeks I realized for the vast majority of students the process is not a learning process at all, but a mechanical process of transferring English from textbooks, reference books, and teacher's lectures into notebooks. The students' minds are

hardly involved at all, and the evidence is that the vast majority of my students, and the vast majority of students in other schools I have since visited in Sooncheon and its environs, have in five years learned, in effective terms, *no English at all*. The best of the students know some English words, often useless ones accumulated for the purpose of passing, they hope, some examination or another, and perhaps recognize some previously learned sentences, and then often only if mispronounced Korean style. But in fact I have encountered only two students at five schools I have visited who show signs of "knowing English" in a functional sense.

Even the best of the students have virtually no idea of how English actually sounds or how it is pronounced. I ran into baffling problems of comprehension, in the almost universal inability, for example, for students to distinguish between two words that are very different to me: *three* and *thirty*. Both, to all of my students, and to other people that I have since encountered are pronounced "쓰리". So they never have any idea which word I am saying.

Even more baffling somewhat later when we were working on color words was the students' inability to distinguish when I was saying "red" and when I was saying "black". The former they tended to hear as the latter. I have puzzled over this for weeks, and I think I have finally reached an understanding. When I say "red" it is apparently to their ears like nothing they have ever heard and like nothing that they have ever expected to hear. It certainly can not be the word "red", which is, of course, pronounced "레드". So what can it be? The American teacher insists that it is a color word, and it begins with some kind of odd lip movement, so it must be "black!"

So the majority of my students, approaching 100 percent, have, to my thinking, a zero practical knowledge of English, by which I mean essentially that they have zero ability to "make sentences" in any sense of that term. That is, they cannot generate sentences of their own in either speech or writing, and they cannot re-generate sentences receptively, that is, they have no strategy for comprehending spoken sentences and very minimal capacity to decode written sentences. This somewhat expected, but not the extent to which it seems to be true.

The biggest shock was to discover that a significant number of students, approaching 20 percent in my worst class, have apparently avoided for five years learning any English at all, except for a spotty recognition, here and there, of a word or two. This is unbelievable, so I will repeat it: up to 20 percent of the students, and there are at least several such students in each of my classes, have avoided learning any English at all.

I discovered this while working on the identity material mentioned above in class I was using a blackboard chart such as the one in figure 2 below. A copy of this chart was first put on the blackboard and then copied by students so they would have a small version of it at their desks to work with individually. Using this chart the students

my	is	-s	XXX	XX	and	I	name
live	in	with	mother	father			
sister	brother	grand-	am	a			
second	old	year	student	at			
SCHS	like	to	-ing	play	watch		
to	baseball	soccer	basketball				
read	music	TV	movies	travel			

Fig. 2: Word chart for identity utterances

had been generating sentences (in one sense or another) such as:

My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

His name is \_\_\_\_\_.

I live in Ssangam (Sooncheon, Yuso, ...).

He lives with his mother and father.

I have two brothers and two sisters.

I'm a second year student.

etc.

We had generated sentences like this in various ways: (1) I would, perhaps, say such a sentence and a student would (a) write it, or (b) tap it out on the chart at his desk or at the blackboard. In this sense a student is "making" a sentence receptively, for even though I have made it first, he can write it or tap it out on the chart only if he has recreated it mentally. Or students would individually get up and say such things about themselves or other students in response to questioning. Or given minimal clueing they would write such sentences.

In the process of encouraging students to make such sentences I discovered hiding out, usually in the back of the room, a few students who had zero ability to do any of those things, even to repeat such a sentence when spoken to them word by word or tapped out very slowly on the chart. Most of these students did not even know the vocabulary involved. From their behavior and reactions I conclude that they had apparently never become aware of words such as "mother", "father", "year", "student", "live", etc. In a couple of such cases, in shocked disbelief, I brought boys forward to the black board and pointed one by one to each of the words on the chart, indicating, if you know this word, say it. In one case, one boy responded negatively, indicating he did not know any of the words on the chart "I", "am", "name" and "is." Another boy did not do as well. He did not know "name" either.

I do not know how pervasive this situation is. I am sure it is not true of only my class. I have asked other English teachers about it in Sooncheon and in Seoul, too, and

most admit that there are at least a few such students in each of their classes. I find this truly shocking, and a strong condemnation of the present system, which allows students to waste their time and energy year after year in such a non-productive fashion. I conclude, also, that it is primarily the large, undifferentiated class that contributes to this situation, for of course no teacher is able to be aware of what is happening with each of some 60 students. And this then enables some students to be there only in a physical sense and to learn literally nothing year after year after year.

And even most of what the best of the students are learning is not anything I would identify as English, not in a functional sense.

*Methodology used in teaching.* My teaching program has two main elements. The first I call "focussed listening." This is a technique developed and elaborated on at the Language Teaching Research Center in Seoul(언어 교육 연구원) during the last decade. On the surface it appears to be a kind of "dictation" exercise, in that it involves the teacher saying something and the students writing it down. This similarity, however, is only apparent. In fact, writing is not an essential part of the process at all, in that pre-literate learners can use the technique also. With students who know the writing system, however, their response to what the teacher says is to attempt to write it down. The teacher may repeat the utterance being worked on a score or more times. The student's task is to break the utterance down into its components and record them, in writing, to write them down, that is. The teacher, while the student is struggling to do this is giving constant feedback by indicating to the student that an additional word is needed between the third and fourth words he has written; or that the second word he has written is incorrect; or that the last word is misspelled, or needs a suffix, etc.

This technique of "focussed listening" is not thought of as a "listening comprehension" exercise in the usual sense of that term, but as a means of teaching and reinforcing elements of grammatical structure, for it turns out that learners "hear" sentences in terms of the grammar that they have in their heads. If a listener to an utterance, for example, has no article rule for English, he will tend very strongly not to hear articles, however prominent they might be. By insisting to him that there is another word in the sentence "Give me blue rod" one is not only getting him to "hear" the article "a", one is also facilitating the incorporation of an "article" rule into his grammar of English.

So I have been using this process very extensively in order to assist the students to build a correct internal grammar of English that they can then use to make their own sentences, receptively and productively.

In conjunction with this focussed listening, I am utilizing some elements of Caleb Gattegno's "Silent Way," including the use of small colored rods which students manipulate in various non-trivial ways to assist in the making of English utterances.

During the twelve weeks I have been teaching, I have of course focussed on various



and indicate with my pointer to the class that there are six spaces—which they have learned means that the utterance they will hear has six words in it. I also point out the period at the end, and then I say in a completely natural way:

Give a blue rod to me.

I say this over and over until the students, or most of them, have it and are able to write it down exactly. While I am saying it over and over, I circulate through the class, pointing out errors to students by marking on their papers, or approving and indicating that what they have done is correct. When they have this, I write on the board

B: \_\_\_\_\_ ?

indicating again that there are three spaces and making sure they notice the question mark. Then taking two blue rods, I pantomime and say, over and over again:

Which blue rod?

And again I circulate through the class, correcting and indicating approval of what the students are writing, encouraging those who are baffled or who are on a completely wrong track.

Then I write on the board

A: \_\_\_\_\_ .

and this time say nothing. Instead I just hold up the big blue rod and point to the spaces on the board. Eventually one of the brighter students ventures a guess. Not quite correctly he says in a loud voice

“Big blue rod.”

and I indicate qualified approval, indicating “Yes, you’re on the right track, but not quite right,” by nodding and pointing to the first space. Eventually this student or another ventures a correction, perhaps “a big blue rod,” which I reject. This then is corrected, *by one of the students*, to “the big blue rod.” This last I consider to be of supreme importance. What is happening here is very significant: the students are creating their own utterances, with minimal aid from the teacher. The learning when they do this is deeper and longer lasting than it would have been if I had immediately jumped in with a correction which the students would then have aped.

Using techniques such as this—a combination of intensive, focussed listening, of demonstration with rods, etc., I and the students together create the following dialogue:

- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| A: Give a blue rod to me. | (presented by focussed listening)               |
| B: Which blue rod?        | (presented by focussed listening and pantomime) |
| A: The big blue rod.      | (presented by pantomime/demonstration)          |
| B: Here you are.          | (presented by focussed listening/action)        |

- A. Give another blue rod to me. (presented by focussed listening)  
 B. Which one? (presented by pantomime. With this utterance, the students' first "guess" is "Which blue rod?" but the fact that there are only two spaces on the board forces them to abandon that and, eventually come up with "Which one?")
- A: The medium-sized one. (presented by demonstration)  
 B: Here you are. (presented by demonstration)  
 A: Give the other blue rod to me. (presented by focussed listening)  
 B: Here you are. (presented by demonstration)

After we have created this dialogue together as a class, I then endeavor to have the students act out, perform, recreate utterances such as this, using sets of rods. My aim is *not* to have them practice this dialogue, but to use language such as this that they themselves create anew. My job at this point in fact is to prevent them from just aping the utterances we have created in a rote fashion, perhaps by taking all the blue rods away from them, so they will not be tempted to say the sentence "Give a blue rod to me."

I spent several class hours working on material like this with my classes as a whole—not working in groups—because I thought that I had to give them some kind of basis before I went ahead and had them working as groups. I was a little bit afraid, as a matter of fact, to move from class activity to purely group activity.

After three or four class hours, however, I realized that *most* of the boys were not learning very well. Half or more were not even hanging on very well to the eight color words involved (red, green, white, black, blue, yellow, brown, orange). They could as a class, following the lead of a handful of fairly good students chant out things like

a red rod  
 a green rod...etc.

but if presented with a red rod all but that handful could not remember the word "red" or "green", and if asked for a red or green rod could not come up with it.\*

\* I had made in this regard an unwarranted assumption. I had assumed that students would know things like color and size words, but of course they do not. The fact that this kind of vocabulary was introduced to them briefly four or five years ago when they were in first or second year middle school does not count, for since then there has been no re-introduction or reinforcement of such learning. This, of course, is true of most areas of the English language. Students do not know irregular past tense forms of verbs because no care is taken to give them constant practice with them every year throughout their learning years; they do not know the English number system, how to tell time, etc. At the same time that they are ignorant of virtually all of the basic material, never having had the time to master it, they are being presented with ever more complex and abstract structures and vocabulary, none of which, in turn, is presented thoroughly, practiced enough, or reinforced properly. So there is an ever-increasing body of English material that the students are increasingly at a loss about, and that it is assumed they should know, because it was once "taught" to them.



very unusual is taking place. Most of the noise is English—students saying things in English, creating their own utterances in English in a non-rote, non-mechanical fashion, with energy and excitement. They are making utterances in English, which to my mind is exactly and almost exclusively what should be going on in an English class.

And the intensity and degree of involvement with which most of them are doing this is sometimes surprising.

They are, for example, proving at times to be more inventive than I am in devising activities that exercise the language presented to them. I imagined for example, with the simple identification task (identifying rods by size and color) that they would simply go around the table and take turns identifying rods. In each class, however, I had groups of students inventing new and interesting ways to do this. At one table, a boy had covered all the rods with piece of paper and was shooting them at random, the other boys having to instantly identify the rod as it came shooting out. At another table, the task into a kind of television game show, with a "panel of experts" identifying the rods as they were presented.

And the tasks for the most part seem to involve them and motivate them, though occasionally I get something started that I imagine will keep them occupied for the period and they exhaust its possibilities in fifteen minutes. Or occasionally I conceive of an activity that I can not adequately present to them because of my still limited Korean. In other words, I do have failures, but they are failures of planning and presentation, I believe, rather than failures of the method, which seems to me to be motivating and involving students as I have never observed before.

While the boys are working in groups I move from table to table, assisting, sometimes merely observing. Occasionally I will approach a table and the boys will indicate to me that they do not need me—we are doing okay, they will tell me, which I feel is one of the real triumphs of this approach, one of the aims of which is to lessen the students' dependence on the teacher and make them responsible for their own learning.

The approach is also leading some of the students to explore the possibilities of English beyond what is simply presented to them. I am occasionally, in my rounds from table to table, captured by a student or group of students who have an unusual arrangement of rods set up and want to know to say in English something represented by their arrangement, for example:

I have half of the rods and he has the other half.

or

I have six rods, two big ones (the red one and the black one), two medium-sized ones (the green one and the while one), and two small ones (the brown one and the orange one).

I also have students coming into my class early and playing with the charts and

the rods, seeing what kind of sentences they can make, in the various sense of the words "making sentences." Several students have borrowed sets of rods to take home, so they can practice outside of class.

And finally the approach I am using has been successful in incorporating the drop-outs, the non-learners those who have spent the last five years hiding in English classes, deliberately learning nothing, or next to nothing. Two things have happened. In several classes, these students, seeing, I think, the intense involvement of the majority and wanting to take part in what, suddenly and surprisingly for an English class, looks like fun, have spread themselves out at tables where there are better students, and are learning from the better ones. In one class, the table of non-participants recruited one of the class's good students to come and show them how to do what everyone else was doing.

In several classes, these previous non-learners have pretty much remained by themselves, but they are no longer sitting doing nothing. It is almost impossible, given the setting and my constant prowling around the classroom, for them to do nothing.

They are for the first time doing something in an English classroom, not always exactly the same tasks as the better students, but similar ones, on a simpler level and more slowly, but they are performing in English and are beginning for the first time to learn.

My tentative conclusions at this point, unsupported admittedly by any kind of rigorous data, but conclusions based on informed and alert observation of student reactions and behavior, are:

- (1) This approach, defined as a combination of focussed listening and silent way methodology, separating the large class into small groups, is eminently viable for the large heterogeneous class that is typical in the Korean secondary school.
- (2) It is an approach, in particular, that enables to do what I maintain should be a defining characteristic of a language learning class, that is, it enables learners to spend most of their time "making" sentences in both the receptive and productive senses of that word.
- (3) It is an approach that provides a setting where fast learners can learn quickly, slow learners can learn slowly, and non-learners can for the first time begin learning.
- (4) It is an approach easily usable, it seems to me, by Korean English teachers, who in fact could undoubtedly do it better than I do. My own use of it is on occasion inefficient in that I flounder around in trying to convey to my students exactly what it is that I want them to do. Korean teachers could do that better than I do, certainly. It is also a method that does not require a native speaker of English. I find, in fact, that I speak very little in class—except when presenting utterances for focussed listening, all of which are prepared beforehand. There have been several classes where I noticed myself saying almost nothing: it is the students who are

generating utterances for the most, not the teacher. Almost all teacher-generated language can be prepared beforehand or can be silent, using the word charts.

This fact should go far to allay the fears of Korean English teachers when new methods of teaching are presented to them, most of which in the past at least have suggested that they do what they know they cannot do—start speaking English in the classroom.

I have in fact talked to a number of middle school and high school English teachers about what I am doing and the response from a couple of them has been interesting. Instead of saying "That's very nice, sounds good to me, but of course I could not do that" they have said just the opposite: "That sounds like something I could do in my classroom."

At this point, I am not really proposing that anyone jump in and try the method outlined here. I do seriously suggest however that it be explored and explored very seriously, probably at the first year middle school level first, where it should be even more successful than the level I am using it at. The possibility that an approach such as might be effective should be very seriously considered and explored, for some really effective answers to the long-standing and I believe severe problem of English education is long overdue, that problem being how to effectively teach English to large classes of heterogeneously-grouped students being taught by non-native speakers of English.

Sooncheon Commercial High School

Sooncheon City, Chunnam 540

Korea

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