

Resistance and Results

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The intention of this paper is to outline some of the characteristics of Korean learners of English and some of the potential difficulties they face in a communicative classroom. As the standard of English varies so widely, our comments will be limited to general identifiable areas in which work may be done. Observations made are formed on the basis of the first year's experience of the English language teaching project at the Language Research Institute of Seoul National University.

1. Standard of English

Korean speakers of English seem to be characterised by the following: Firstly, they seem to have a massive passive knowledge about the language. This often takes the form of an enormous command of lexis, often very inappropriate to the situation. Secondly, they have a very poor understanding of the spoken language: "listening comprehension" is often so difficult that many learners are put off the language by their inability to respond to even simple native-speaker utterances. This is all the more surprising, given the fact that Korean learners have access to English-language television and radio broadcasts, however poor the standard of these sources may be.

2. Classroom Expectations

For many Korean students the language classroom is perceived as a place where wisdom is imparted. Very often students, whatever their motivation for learning the language, feel that an English course should have a high factual information content. There are many possible explanations for this, but the most obvious factor is associated with exercises in translation and grammatical explanation, invariably teacher dominated. This sort of expe-

ctation is reinforced by the sort of tests and exams which students are required to take at various intervals in their careers: tests which require the production and repetition of discrete items of information about the language.

3. Resistance to Change

In any situation there will always be resistance to change. In our work we have encountered resistance to communicative language teaching methodology at various levels. We have also encountered learners who respond with tremendous enthusiasm to our work. How is it that different learners can respond in widely different ways? What is it that is difficult for some learners and not for others?

First, the realisation that speaking a language (and understanding it when spoken) is not a factual item that can be learned. Although it is notoriously difficult to measure empirically. It is quite clear that using a language is an ongoing skill, and not a table of information to be learned.

It follows then, that learners who are unwilling to admit that time is necessary to practise the various skills will never overcome "the language barrier." For many, the shift from "product" to "process" is too much to cope with: there is a lot of security in the traditional (and often incorrect) wisdom of the school textbook.

Second, the role of the teacher in the communicative classroom is greatly different to, for example, that of a university lecturer. In activating learners' abilities to use the language we function as facilitators: gone is the dominant figure of authority, the students have to learn for themselves. Many feel the need for spoon-feeding, this simply does not and can not happen. No one can speak for the learner: help can be given but it is up to him or her to articulate the sounds.

Third, a major source of difficulty for some learners is the refusal to acknowledge that work need to be done. This is manifest in a number of ways, but the most serious is the unwillingness to take (linguistic) risks in the classroom. That is to say that these learners feel content with displaying what has already been internalized, i.e. what they already know, rather than learning how and what to learn. The overall impression is one of under-achievement.

4. What can be done?

In general, the work done with the students is designed to push the students into overcoming the difficulties outlined above. Pairwork and groupwork discussions are set up to maximize student talking (and therefore interacting) time. Tasks are given which require the students to attempt to use the language in new ways and in new situations. In short activities are given which require risk taking, not merely encourage it. In addition to the speaking activities, which include responding to non-native speaker stimulus, the students are encouraged to think about the process of listening. They are taught something of the principles of "intelligent listening," that is the ability and confidence to comprehend a message on the basis of what has been understood, and not by reading a transcript.

5. Results

Those learners who overcome the difficulties outlined in section 3 have responded well and shown great improvements in the following ways: Firstly, they become confident. They are able to realise that the information learned at school can be used, given the right circumstances. Secondly, they learn how to learn a language. They acquire some of the fundamental skills necessary for comprehension and production of a modern language. Thirdly, they begin to have a feel for the interpersonal nature of communication: that the foreign language is not only an object of study but also an instrument for the coherent transmission of information and ideas from one person to another.

(※ 발표자의 사정으로 사회자인 이현복 교수가 대신 발표함).