

“Does Your Frog Speak Korean?”: Challenges of Teaching English to Korean Speakers

Cheryl A. Luton and John W. Luton, Elizabeth City State University and Wycliffe Associates

Abstract: This paper discusses the challenges of providing English language instruction to learners enrolled in a three-week intensive program at a university located in Pohang, South Korea, during the summer 2011 term. Challenges encountered and addressed by the primary author and a team of eight instructors included those which were pedagogical, situational, practical and cultural in nature. Instructional problems related to linguistic differences between the English and Korean language systems are also discussed.

1. Background

An intensive, three-week English Language Learning (ELL) program, which was conducted at the Asian Research Institute of Language and Culture (ARILAC) of Handong Global University, was jointly sponsored by Global Bible Translators (GBT) in South Korea and Wycliffe Associates (WA), an affiliate of Wycliffe Bible Translators, International (WBT). WA's primary purpose for providing English language instruction to Koreans is to support the translation of the Bible into the more than 2,000 languages that do not yet possess the Scriptures, including such languages for which there presently exists no writing system. The languages that are currently without the Bible represent approximately 340 million people worldwide. As a partner organization of WBT International, GBT sends translators all over the world to participate in Bible translation, language development, and literacy projects. The majority of GBT personnel work in areas where English is the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and, therefore, need a high level of English proficiency to function effectively in their tasks as they work alongside translators, linguists and other personnel from around the world.

In 2010, Dan Kramer, who presently serves as manager of Education Services for WA, developed a program for providing intensive English language instruction for speakers of Korean. In July of that same year, Kramer led the first three-week program of instruction, which was then called the Korean English Exchange Program (KEEP/ARILAC). In November 2010, several Korean students who had completed KEEP/ARILAC (I) came to the WA headquarters in Orlando, Florida, to participate in KEEP/Orlando, a six-week program of similar instruction. During the summer of 2011 (July 23 – August 10), KEEP/ARILAC II was offered to 34 Korean learners. While the information detailed in this paper is based primarily on the KEEP/ARILAC II 2011 experience, references to the earlier KEEP programs of instruction, as well as KEEP/Orlando 2011, will also be made.

2. Instructional challenges

While studies in the academic literature that are directly related to providing English instruction to Korean speakers is somewhat limited (Lee 2003:39), especially as this relates to the interactions of Korean students in the classroom, a number of authors have documented a variety of instructional challenges that have been encountered. Martin (2003) described pedagogic challenges that relate to Korean students' experiences with teacher-centered rather than student-centered classrooms. Contributing further to these challenges was the learners' almost exclusive exposure to the Grammar-Translation method in language instruction which,

according to its design, “limits classroom language experience to dictation, manipulation, translation, and the construction of isolated sentences in response to exercise sections of textbooks” (p. 16). The Grammar-Translation method was first taught in Korea during the 1920s and has dominated English classrooms in Korea ever since (Song 2003:75).

Lee (2003) listed several problems encountered by students who have “mainly approached English through grammar in acquisition poor environments” (p. 30). The main problem mentioned by Lee is that students who have primarily used the Grammar-Translation method tend to “over-monitor” their attempts at oral language production.¹ This not only limits the number of instructor-learner and learner-learner interactions in the classroom, it also impedes or restricts the development of fluency in oral language production. As a result of these traditional methods of teaching, many Korean students enter higher education English instruction environments with oral skills that are underdeveloped. They also demonstrate a lack of confidence to use whatever interactive skills they do possess.

According to Martin (2003), English language instructors also confront situational, practical and cultural challenges when teaching Korean students (pp. 17-20). Situational obstacles include the fact that Korean students who are studying English in their own country possess limited opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom context. Many students also lack the strong motivation to master the interactive skills of the target language because they are taking English as an academic requirement, rather than as a result of personal choice. Coupled with these situational challenges are practical limitations that include large class sizes in many university programs. Jackson (2003:150) identified six primary challenges that result from dealing with large class sizes in Korea:

- arranging the seating in a manner that is conducive to learning
- providing appropriate opportunities for oral participation
- organizing and conducting pair and small group work
- getting to know the students individually
- administration
- dealing with mixed-ability groups

Martin (2003) indicated that dealing with large classes in Korea leads to limited opportunities to practice English skills during class, little feedback from the instructor regarding language performance, and few opportunities for personal contact with the instructor outside of class (p. 18). Lee (2003) pointed out that this situation is sometimes exacerbated by “Korean teachers whose [English] proficiency levels are not high enough or by [the use] of audio and visual tapes that are not interactive” (p. 30).

Native English speakers who instruct Korean students must also deal with cultural challenges. In the traditional, teacher-centered, Korean classroom, the instructor-student relationship is hierarchical (Dunham and Robinson 1993:21). As a result, Korean students are generally reluctant to initiate interactions with the teacher or even to ask questions. In fact, as a study by Yang (1992) concluded, Korean students were more communicatively reserved among three Asian nationalities, including Korean, Japanese and Chinese participants (p. 147). When

¹For a full explanation of the Monitor Hypothesis and its function in Second Language Acquisition, see Krashen (1988).

learners are educated in a teacher-centered environment, “it is appropriate for students to rely on the teacher’s authority, guidance, and knowledge” (Martin 2003:19). As a result, students are not encouraged to assume as much responsibility for their own learning as their counterparts in more student-centered environments.

Martin (2003) also discussed the role of “face” (*ch’emyon*) in the Korean classroom. A teacher in a traditional Korean classroom might show respect for a student’s “face” by not insisting that a student answer a particular question if he or she seems hesitant or does not know the answer. The student might show respect for the teacher’s “face” by not asking the teacher a direct question, since the teacher might not know the answer and could lose “face” in front of the students (p. 19). Given these cultural challenges, Korean students are “likely to expect the teacher to intuit their needs rather than state those needs directly” (Robinson and Fisher 1992:87). Naturally, this situation may run counter to the more direct and clearer forms of teacher-student interactions expected in an ELL or EFL classroom when the instructor is a native English speaker who is not from Korea. This apparent cultural-disconnect, at least from the standpoint of English Language Learning (ELL) pedagogy, must be appropriately addressed in the classroom where the “role of language teaching is to facilitate learning and to develop ... students as independent thinkers and learners” (Oak 2003:190). Finally, as Kim (2000) points out, modern language teaching, especially when conducted in a foreign setting, requires that teachers be well trained in both methodology and the cultural context in which they are teaching.

3. Teaching English to Koreans: KEEP/ARILAC II

3.1 Introduction

On July 23, 2011, a team of nine volunteer teachers entered a classroom with 34 Korean students to implement an ELL program developed by Dan Kramer, manager of Education Services for Wycliffe Associates. The first day was a day of introduction and preparation for the coming weeks of instruction and field trips, and the initial session ended with a reading and skit performed by the instructional team. The story was about a couple of frogs who fell into a deep hole and how one of those frogs escaped the hole because he perceived that the great crowd of fellow frogs surrounding the hole was cheering him on. The team left the learners that day with the message that they were all in this language learning program together and there would be much encouragement along the way. Later in the week, the team would learn that their great efforts in performing the skit had been a bit misunderstood because of cultural differences, in this case, due to different perceptions of the sounds made by frogs. This would be the first of many challenges that would need to be addressed in order to successfully complete an ELL program in a Korean context.

3.2 Assessment and placement

Prior to the three-week intensive English Language Learning program called KEEP/ARILAC II, students at Handong Global University, Global Bible Translators staff members, missionaries, and pastors were invited to register for the program. There was a minimal fee of approximately \$250 that paid for student housing at the university. The most difficult issue for those participating in the program in many cases was being released from their work duties while they attended classes, since classes ran from 9:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

University students were between semesters. Participants were responsible for their own meals except on some occasions when area churches provided lunches at the program site.

Participants ranged in age from 17 to 68 years old. Their ability levels ranged from level 1 learners, who had very limited ability to communicate in English, to level 4 learners, who were nearly fluent and very capable of being understood and understanding. Their levels were assessed on the second day of the program using assessments that addressed each of the basic communication skills: reading, writing, listening/comprehension, and speaking.

The assessment of student reading skills involved having students read a short, but familiar passage in English from the Bible. A series of questions was then asked to assess how well students understood the passage. They were asked to identify big ideas or themes if they were able to understand the passage well enough to discuss it. The assessor took anecdotal notes as each student read and discussed the passage. The assessor also scored each student on a scale of 1-4 with 1 being the lowest ability level and 4 being the highest.

Writing skills were assessed with a timed writing sample. Students selected a prompt from a list of three topics and wrote about their selected topic. They were instructed to write as organized and error-free as possible and were given approximately 30 minutes in which to compose their sample. The assessor scored each student's writing sample on a scale of 1-4, consistent with the other assessments.

Students were assessed on their listening/comprehension skills by watching a short video selection from a DVD and then providing a summary in writing. They also had to respond to several questions that were designed to test their level of comprehension. Student writing was not assessed in this assessment, as the assessor was only interested in assessing the student's ability to listen and respond appropriately to what they heard. The assessor then read each student's summary of the selection, checked the responses to the questions, and scored the listening skills on a scale a 1-4.

Finally, students were assessed on their ability to speak English by participating in a one-on-one interview. The interview was also recorded to provide the student and teachers with a sample of students' speaking abilities prior to the intensive training. The assessor asked each student a series of questions. If students struggled with the questions, the interview was not prolonged. The assessors were constantly aware of those students who struggled and were careful not to overwhelm them in the assessment phase of the program. Again, students were scored on a scale of 1-4.

Upon conclusion of the assessments, the instructors met to make decisions about student placement based on the assessment results. Students were placed into five small groups of six or seven students with similar ability levels. Groups were coded by colors so instructors were aware of the ability levels, but students were not made aware of the purpose of the color codes. It was necessary to have two groups of level three learners. There were two groups of learners who were assessed as level four learners, and there was one group of learners who were assessed at level two or below. Students' nametags were marked with colored dots to identify their groups. Students would travel to each of six rotations where they received instruction. The rotations were: Poetry, Directions, Story and Writing, History, Bible, and Prayer.

3.3 Implementation and challenges

The product of learning or overall outcome of the three weeks of intensive instruction was a 5- to 7-minute formal presentation in English that would be given before all peers and

instructors. The presentation had to include: (1) giving an introduction of themselves that addressed some information about their family and their culture; (2) sharing their personal story of how and why they had chosen to spend their life in Bible translation or other ministry-related work; (3) reading and explaining a Bible verse that was meaningful in their life; and finally, (4) saying a prayer in English. Needless to say, the culminating product would require a great deal of effort on the part of the learners and the instructors. Dan Kramer developed each rotation with instruction and outcomes that, together, would result in the students' being capable of successfully completing this formal presentation. The rotations provided a variety of interactive opportunities that were not common to English instruction experienced by these students in their previously encountered, more traditional, and teacher-centered language classes.

Rotation one, Poetry, provided students opportunities to explore language, writing, and a variety of poetry samples including: Haiku, Tanka, Cinquain, Diamante, and Acrostic poems. One of the challenges in teaching English to Korean students is that pedagogy used in traditional Korean classrooms is very teacher-centered and students are not given many opportunities to speak or ask questions. In addition, students are taught using the Grammar-Translation method, a method that is largely based on decoding activities that require students to translate word-for-word from English to their mother tongue. This non-interactive and rote method of teaching is not in line with pedagogical theories or more student-centered instructional methods. In the poetry rotation, students learned to write a variety of types of poetry. The safe learning environment established by the instructor, and the small group setting, allowed students to feel comfortable sharing their poetry with each other. A second instructor working with the students in this rotation even helped students put their poetry to music, an activity that provided enjoyment and additional practice in speaking and listening. WA volunteer and retired public school teacher, Deb Blake, reported, "Because the students were in ability groups, each class had to be adjusted accordingly. All the students studied the same poems (i.e. Mon. = Limerick; Tue. = Haiku; etc.), but I had to make sure my expectations and assignments were more challenging for the more advanced English Language Learners and were conducted at a slower pace with more 'in class' examples and discussions for the less advanced students. In either case, I did see improvement in all 5 groups with their English language learning and in their confidence to speak English and ask questions".

Opportunities in this rotation were enriching to the students' experiences and provided assistance with building their levels of confidence, which would be important to the development of their abilities to successfully complete their formal presentation. Even the use of music was instrumental in building their confidence, as several of the students actually decided to use music in their final presentations. The students displayed their finished poetry samples on the walls on the multi-purpose room where formal presentations were given. They were proud of their work and enjoyed seeing others read their poetry.

Kramer designed rotation 2, Directions, to provide practice in receiving and giving directions, a skill that is necessary in real-world activities. These opportunities were provided through a series of authentic tasks that included: listening to oral directions and creating crafts or projects; listening to oral directions and playing games; speaking or giving oral directions to another student to create a project; and setting up Skype accounts so students could participate in follow-up communication and additional learning opportunities with a Skype partner in the United States. Students considered this rotation to be the "fun class" and it provided learning in a non-threatening environment. Situational challenges in Korean classrooms involve students having limited opportunities to use language outside of their classrooms. By making the

classroom a place where English is spoken to create crafts and play games, students have opportunities to practice English and acquire some very useful vocabulary in a non-traditional manner. A common challenge in Korean classrooms where English is being taught is that there is a lack of motivation for students to learn English because they are fulfilling an academic requirement. The students in this program are highly motivated to learn English because they know they will need it in their work. The addition of enjoyable activities that promote the use of real-world skills was also a motivational tool for students.

Another skill that is important to the participants in this program is the ability to effectively pray in English. This is very difficult and, because these Korean students consider public prayer to be extremely important, they are often hesitant to attempt praying in English. Kramer understands this concern and has developed a rotation in his curriculum to address prayer. Students would also be sharing a prayer in English during their formal presentations at the end of the three weeks of instruction. Rotation 3, Prayer, provided time for students to share their own prayer needs and learn more about prayer. Some of the expected outcomes for this rotation were for students to identify cultural differences in prayer (American vs. Korean), to use the four traits of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication), to develop higher-level questions (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) for a selected Bible passage, and to pray aloud in English. According to Joe Blake, a WA volunteer and retired public school teacher, one of the most difficult challenges of teaching the prayer rotation was helping students overcome their lack of confidence. Blake explained that the Korean students were very comfortable praying in Korean, but attempting to translate their prayers into English provided a considerable challenge. In addition, Blake shared that many of these students had never shared their stories or prayers in public in their own language before, so they felt that sharing them in English would be a monumental task.

Rotation 4, Story and Writing, was designed to prepare students to share their own personal stories in their formal presentations. Kramer included lessons on the elements of story that provided opportunities for students to begin by writing short creative journal entries that were shared in the small group and not formally assessed or corrected. One student became concerned on the first day of writing because the instructor did not rigorously evaluate her paper and make all of the corrections that were needed to make it perfect. This is a challenge when teaching Korean students, because through their traditional instruction, producing grammatically correct writing has been over-emphasized to the neglect of other aspects of discourse such as content and style. The instructor had to explain that there would be opportunities for the student to make corrections to her writing, and that the focus of the present lesson was not on correct grammar, but on creative thinking, writing, and sharing the work with others.

Additional challenges in teaching the writing rotation included the limited English vocabulary students possessed. They knew what information they wanted to include in their stories, but they did not always have the English vocabulary to sufficiently express themselves. The instructors for this rotation often needed to listen to the student and then try to help them retrieve words in English to express their thoughts. Such continuous negotiation of meaning could be very frustrating and exhausting, but once students accomplished the task they were quite satisfied with their results. Often linguistic differences² added to the difficulties

²For a complete description of the linguistic differences between Korean and English, as well as some of the challenges these pose in English language instruction, see Robinson (2003).

experienced by the students in relating their stories. For example, since the Korean language does not use articles and possessives, students sometimes had difficulty knowing how to include such needed elements in their writing and speaking. They knew about these parts of speech from their grueling classes in English grammar, but because of the lack of opportunities to use their English, they were limited in their ability to include them in interaction contexts of language production. The everyday intensive interaction practice, while tiring and sometimes leading to moments of frustration, provided students with opportunities to gain higher levels of confidence that come with a deeper understanding of how English is used in practical and authentic contexts.

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties for several of the students was getting started even when they were provided a topic and main points. While they were writing about topics they knew well (their own lives), putting the words on paper in English was almost paralyzing to several of the students. Some had to write their stories in Korean and then translate them into English in order to complete the task. This required even more negotiation of meaning between the students and instructor because of the vast differences between Korean and English syntax. While all of this was extremely time-consuming, requiring much effort on the students' part and necessitating a lot of one-on-one conferences between instructors and students, 32 of 34 students were able to construct their stories in English and share them during their final presentations. One student did not return to the program after learning about the final presentation requirement. Another student did not attend on the day when her presentation was scheduled.

Rotation 5, History, included many activities that provided students an opportunity to relate their rich Korean culture. Because students would be telling their stories and relating their past experiences, this rotation was an important component of the overall educational experience. Challenges in this rotation were similar to those in the other rotations. One of the challenges of the traditional Korean classroom is one of practicality. Class sizes in Korea are very large (anywhere from 40 to 80 or more students) which prohibits students from asking questions or providing feedback to the instructor. Larger classes also prevent students from having opportunities to practice English or receive feedback from their instructors regarding their performance. The design of the KEEP/ARILAC program, which provides small group settings and a curriculum that is bursting with opportunities to practice English, is completely different from traditional models of English instruction in Korean classrooms. In addition, there are cultural challenges in the traditional Korean classroom that have been successfully addressed in the model developed by Kramer. For instance, in the traditional classroom the instructor-student relationship is hierarchical and students have not been encouraged to take much responsibility for their own learning. It is assumed that the teacher has all the knowledge and it is his or her responsibility to distribute it to the students. Honor and respect are characteristics of the Korean people that are obvious in the family, in education, and everywhere. There is an unwritten expectation that helps students and instructors "save face". Korean students do not want to be put on the spot and will not put the instructor on the spot, even if it means they will not get important questions answered. The curriculum used for rotation 5, and all of the others, provided opportunities for the instructor to share openly and to encourage the students to feel free to ask and answer questions. Of course, the instructors must build a rapport and create a safe learning environment for this sharing to take place.

The final rotation, Bible, was developed to provide English instruction on biblical topics and to promote higher order thinking skills among learners. Students were encouraged to read and discuss biblical passages and to explore well-known topics in biblical literature. While students were only required to select, read, and comment on one verse from the Bible for their

formal presentations, they participated in rich discussions on a daily basis that employed critical thinking skills that are important to mastering English. Nancy Mercier, a WA volunteer and former missionary to China, shared that the greatest challenge in teaching the Bible rotation was that students were initially very reluctant to answer questions. Since the instructor was asking thought provoking, higher-level questions, students were not confident enough to attempt to answer them in the beginning. As time went on, students gained confidence, became more comfortable, and began answering the questions. Mercier remarked that some of the younger students often answered more quickly, but did not necessarily have the correct answers. She found that her more mature students who had deep biblical knowledge were often less likely to share because they lacked the necessary language skills.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of the KEEP/ARILAC II program and curriculum presented the team with a variety of challenges during the three weeks of instruction. Many of the challenges that are normally experienced when Korean students study English in Korea, such as pedagogical, situational, practical and cultural challenges, were effectively addressed. Instructional strategies employed by caring, friendly instructors to small groups in each rotation, as well as the provision of opportunities for sharing through reading, writing, speaking and listening in an academically safe learning environment, ultimately delivered successful students who were able to effectively and confidently present their stories, Bible verses and prayers in public at the end of the program.

The instructional team also learned many valuable lessons through this teaching assignment. Perhaps one of the most interesting was about frogs, prompted by the skit on the first day of instruction. After the skit, the students smiled politely and clapped their hands in appreciation of the instruction team's efforts. However, after a few days of rapport building, working together, eating together and visiting historical sites, one student felt confident enough to share with the team that Korean frogs do not say "ribbit", and in fact, on the day when the frog skit was presented, the Korean students were a bit confused because they thought the frog actors were saying "rabbit", while jumping around like rabbits. The Korean student then demonstrated the Korean frog sound: *Gae-gool-gae-gool*. The team leader had to admit that this was one cultural challenge that had not been anticipated. Does your frog speak Korean? This might be a great lesson for next year's curriculum.

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