

How university students perceive English curriculum?

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Abstract

Korean government has made continued efforts to aim the communicative method as the national object of English education since the 6th curriculum. However, a number of researches have reported that there are consistent problems in English education instructions in public schools. Students in Korea including Jeju have suffered from communicative competence such as speaking and writing since public schools in Korea have focused on grammar-translation method.

This research focuses on the differences exists among undergraduate students' perceptions on the effectiveness of university English curriculum in Jeju. The participants in this research are the first and second year undergraduate students in the Department of Tourism English for the spring semester of 2017 in Jeju province. The data were collected in May, 2017 by distributing survey questionnaire to the students in four classes. Six questions in the questionnaire were used to measure how participants perceived the importance of various goals regarding English instructional approaches. Participants tend to be more interested in Communicative language teaching (CLT) than the traditional English instruction (TRA).

Key words :

English education in Jeju, grammar-translation method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English instructional approaches, communicative competence, globalization, Jeju

Introduction

The significance of English education for globalization has been enhanced in Jeju since the number of foreign tourists has reached a record high for the last few years. Since English is necessary in everyday life in Jeju, English education has attracted public attention and a lot of efforts for improving English education in Jeju have been consistently made.

However, Korean students' English speaking and writing competence occupies one of the lowest positions in the world in spite of a lot of time and money used into the English education. Communication-based English instruction became popular to produce more competent speakers and writers of English around the late 1990s but English teaching method called grammar-translation method has been dominant especially in secondary schools in Korea including Jeju to prepare for the university entrance examination.

This study explores university English curriculum designed to help undergraduate students enhance their English language skills. The main purpose of this research is to find out how undergraduate students perceive their English curriculum at a selected university in Jeju.

Literature Review

1. A Historical Overview of English Teaching in Korea

English education in Korea is divided into four phases according to Park (1992). In the first phase (1883-1910), Korean government desperately needed translators and interpreters for various western languages. As for English, the first official English education in Korea started at an institution called Tongmunhak to produce official interpreters in 1883. The first official modern school, Yugyoung Gongwon, opened in 1886 to educate mainly government officials, so a small number of people had the chance to study English at this time.

The second phase of English education started during Japanese Annexation of Korea (1910-1945). At this time, secondary schools taught English by grammar-translation to prepare their students for the college entrance examination.

In the third phase (1945-1980), Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and the Korean War (1950-1953) increased the significance of English in Korea because of the increasing contact with America. During this phase, grammar and translation method was emphasized in secondary school as well as in college to prepare for the college entrance examinations.

From 1980 to the present, the fourth phase of English education in Korea, there have been considerable changes in educational policy due to

economic expansion. Grammar-translation method was dominant way of teaching English until the mid 1990s. However, English has been viewed as an international language as Korea's international relations grew more and more diversified since the late 1990s, the need for speaking and writing competency has been strongly demanded. That means that communication-based English instruction started to become popular to produce more competent speakers and writers of English around the late 1990s and completely new English teaching approach was adopted in order to enhance communicative competence such as speaking and writing competence.

2. English Education Approach: focusing on receptive skills

Generally, English is a required subject from primary school through the first year in college in Korea. In other words, Korean students spend almost ten years studying English before they enter a college or university. However, their English speaking and writing competence occupies one of the lowest positions in the world despite huge amount of time and money invested into the English education. According to Jin (2006), Korean students' English proficiency is lacking in spite of their spending huge amount of time and money for their English education in the world.

There have been a lot of researches reporting on problems of English education in public schools in Korea including Jeju even though continued efforts have been made to improve competitiveness of English education. The main reason for the failure of English educational system in Korea is that most secondary school students want to receive higher English scores as means to go to good college or university. They must study constantly for exams, which is a big burden for them. Many students think that the purpose of studying English is to get good English scores to go to good college or university.

Furthermore, Korean English classes are too grammar-oriented. According to Kim (2004), the English instructional methodology in Korea has been criticized for not being practical since it stresses mainly on grammar and English translation. That's why many Korean students' communicative competence such as speaking and writing skills is low compared to students from other European countries.

Nunan (2003) said, "In [Korea], informants spoke frankly of the fact that the quality of English language education in the public sector was so poor that 'no one learns English in school' (p. 606). The instructional methodology of reading comprehension which focuses mainly on English sentence translation and grammar makes a lot of Korean students lose their interests in English. At school, Korean students usually write down and memorize what their teachers say and answer

questions in their text books containing written English questions. Learning is passive, not active. Korean English teachers mostly focus on grammar because of their lack of speaking ability.

Also, it can be hard to find qualified English native speakers due to a low supply of foreign teachers. Some foreign teachers in schools in Korea have no or little teaching experience. What's even worse, large class size with more than 30 students makes it even more difficult for foreign teachers to teach English effectively. That means that most students suffer from low communicative competence.

Many students go to English academy called English Hagwon after school to upgrade their grammar and reading skills to prepare for the university entrance exam. Due to their main focus on learning technical skills, their listening and speaking competence is quite poor in spite of this lengthy experience in English, starting from primary school. Again, all rote learning mainly focusing on grammar and English sentence translation for college entrance exams has been blamed for its impracticality and it has made a lot of primary and secondary school students lose their interests in studying English.

As for college students, one of the main purposes of studying English is to get a good career after their graduation. English language learning and proficiency are vital to their success in pursuit of higher education or in professional development for college students. As a result, most of them are highly exam-oriented and they tend to focus on reading and grammar like Korean secondary school students to receive higher grade in English tests such as TOEIC or TEPS. In contrast to English education in Korea, many European countries emphasize students' communicative competence by accurate pronunciation, focusing on listening comprehension, and fluency of speech.

In short, Korean government has continued its efforts to aim the communicative method as the national object of English education since the 6th curriculum, there have been many researches reporting on systematic problems in English education methodology in public schools. There have been a number of attempts to enhance students' communicative competence, but students suffer from low level of English proficiency, especially speaking and writing competence due to too much focusing on English sentence translation and grammar. Therefore, English education has drawn a lot of public attention and a great effort and considerable investment for enhancing English education have been made in Jeju as well as in Korea.

3. English Education Approach: Focusing on productive skills

English has become the most widely taught foreign language in the world (Kachru & Nelson,

1996) since it has become an international communication tool in various areas throughout the world. Therefore, the widespread use of English has had a significant impact on English education in Korea. Because of accelerated globalization, English has become essential in many areas in Korea, and the need for English communicative competence such as speaking and writing has increased considerably since the late 1990s.

Especially in Jeju, after its nomination as one of the new seven wonders of the natural world in 2011 and its designation as free international city in 2001 by the implementation of the special law, Jeju has become a main tourism center in Korea. The number of foreign visitors to Jeju has reached a record high. That means that English has become an important communication tool in Jeju and the need for English speaking and writing competence has been enormously increased.

There has been a language teaching approach called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is a dominant language teaching methodology emphasizing on enhancing learners' communicative competence such as speaking and writing.

English education in Korea, especially in university, has experienced a radical change from emphasizing on receptive skills such as grammar and reading comprehension to focusing on productive skills such as speaking and writing because of students' need for communicative language skills to improve their English proficiency.

However, a lot of researches have been reporting that there are difficulties with implementing CLT in a foreign language contexts such as in Korea due to several limitations such as large class size with more than 30 students, and preparation for the college entrance exam that emphasizes grammar and reading comprehension (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Gorsuch, 2000; Liu, D., 1999; Anderson, 1993).

Also, many Korean students are reluctant to participate in English conversation class because they spend most of their English language learning classroom hours being taught with grammar translation and rote memorization by Korean teachers. In this classroom environment, they have little opportunity to talk and their reluctance in class participation has been one of the major difficulties to curricular innovations related to CLT in many EFL countries (Bern, 1990; Shamin, 1996).

Most researches on CLT in Korea have been devoted to teachers' perspectives, mostly in secondary school contexts (Choi, 1999; Li, 1998; Guilloteaux, 2004) and there has been little research conducted on college students' perspectives on communication-based English instruction in college settings in Jeju.

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions among undergraduate students regarding English instructions at a selected university in Jeju. It is significant to evaluate English as a Foreign

Language (EFL) university communication-based English instructions in Jeju to find out whether they are meeting their curricular objectives so that EFL university classroom practice and course development can be improved based on an analysis of students' perceptions.

Methodology

1 Research Question

Based on the literature so far, this study explores the differences exists among undergraduate students' perceptions on the effectiveness of college English instruction in Jeju.

2 Definition of Terms

The following terms have been defined to clarify their use in the current study:

1) Traditional English Instruction usually refers to the grammar-translation method, which focuses on the translation of sentences and grammatical analysis. According to Doughty & Williams (1998, p. 50), teacher-student interaction typically means two things: "checking and improving the students' memory of rules and vocabulary items, and checking and improving their comprehension of the grammar rules that had been taught" in the grammar-translation classroom. In the present study, Traditional English Instruction is represented by statements 1-3 on the survey questionnaire.

2) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) refers to a language teaching methodology which focuses on developing learners' communicative competence in the target language (Celce-Murcia, 1997). This methodology "covers a variety of approaches that all focus on helping learners to communicate meaningfully in a target language" (Nunan, 1999, p.303). In the present study, CLT is represented by statements 4-6 on the survey questionnaire. Table 1 provides survey items of the instructional approaches.

<Table 1> Survey Items of the Instructional Approaches.

Major Instructional Approaches	Importance of goals regarding the approaches
1. Traditional English Instruction (TRA)	1, 2, 3
2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	4, 5, 6

3. Participants

The participants in this research is the first and second year undergraduate students in the Department of Tourism English at a selected university in Jeju for the spring semester of 2017. Their English proficiency levels, cultural exposure

of English-spoken countries and opportunities of interacting with English native speakers vary because of their different life experiences. Compared to secondary school English instructions which focus on reading and grammar in preparation for national college entrance exams, college English instruction has more freedom to adopt more communication-based approaches and meet the students' needs.

4. Data collection

4.1 Survey questionnaire

The data were collected in May, 2017 by distributing survey questionnaire to the students in four classes. The Korean version of the survey questionnaire with instructions for the subject was provided to prevent any errors due to misunderstanding of English. The survey questionnaire stated the purpose of this research and asking for cooperation (see Appendix A and B).

4.2 Response Rate

A copy of the survey questionnaire was distributed to 84 first and second year undergraduate students in 4 classes in the Department of Tourism English at a selected university in Jeju. 72 completed student surveys were received by May 10, 2017. Table 2 shows the return rates for the completed surveys based on each selected class.

<Table 2> Summary of Response Rate

Participants	Number of Sample	Number of Responses	Response Rate (%)
Class A (first year)	18	18	100%
Class B (first year)	19	18	94.7%
Class A (second year)	25	19	76%
Class B (second year)	22	17	77.2%
Total	84	72	86.9%

4.3 Perceived Importance of Goals

Six statements in the questionnaire were used to measure how subjects perceived the importance of goals regarding English instructional approaches. The five response scales were as follows:

1. Strongly Disagree 2. Moderately Disagree 3. Uncertain

4. Moderately Agree 5. Strongly Agree

Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations for the perceived importance of goals regarding two instructional approaches, traditional English instruction (TRA), communicative language teaching (CLT). Items 1 to 3 refer to TRA, 4 to 6 refer to CLT.

(Table 3) Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Subjects' Perceptions of the Importance of Goals

The goal of College English instruction is to teach students	Mean (SD) (N=72)
1. To master English sentence patterns and grammatical rules	3.611 (0.743)
2. To translate Korean sentences into English or English sentences into Korean	3.542 (0.716)
3. To prepare for English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, TEPS or entrance exams for graduate schools in Korea, or study overseas	3.500 (0.703)
4. To express ideas freely in various situation in English.	3.736 (0.762)
5. To improve communicative language skills	3.778 (0.671)
6. To understand the content of English programs through television, movies, videotapes, or other audio-visual aids.	3.514 (0.501)

To enhance communicative competence in class, class size and students' proficiency level is important. If a class size is too large or the student's proficiency level is diverse, English teachers can not teach English speaking and writing effectively. In this classroom environment, students have little chance to talk and they are reluctant to participate in class. As a result, students lose their interests in English and suffer from low communicative competence. They might find their classes boring or find the classes too challenging and lose confidence about class participation, resulting in lower degree of satisfaction with the English instruction in their department. Therefore, providing students with proper classroom instruction environment is especially crucial in Korea including Jeju to enhance students' communicative competence.

Data Analysis

When the completed questionnaires were returned, the composite means for each instructional approach and standard deviation were calculated and then summarized in Table 3.

Findings

In terms of the importance of various goals of university English instruction, the above data in Table 3 show that participants put the highest importance to statement 5 (To develop communicative language skills) with a mean score of 3.778, and the lowest importance to statement 3 (To prepare for English proficiency tests, such as TOEFL, TOEIC, or entrance exams of graduate schools in Korea, or further study abroad) with a mean score of 3.500. The data in Table 3 indicates that Communicative language teaching (CLT) is viewed as more important instructional approach than the traditional English instruction (TRA).

Conclusion

This study focuses on describing and exploring perceptions regarding English instruction in the Department of Tourism English at a selected university in Jeju for the spring semester of 2017. Participants tend to be more interested in Communicative language teaching (CLT) than the traditional English instruction (TRA).

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