

Missing Benefits of Online EFL Education in Korea

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ABSTRACT: English as a Foreign Language has been taught for decades in Korea, and as part of the evolution of the times it is now taught both offline and online. For both situations, the Korean government has set forth policies, such as mandating that English be taught through a communicative approach, and that online learning must focus on video lectures. In both online and offline contexts, there are challenges, but the online context in particular presents specific difficulties stemming from longstanding educational preferences on the part of both teachers and learners, as well as government policies. This paper discusses those unique issues with reference to research studies focusing on educational learning environments and the Korean context.

KEYWORDS: *e-learning, English as a foreign language, South Korea, tertiary online education*

I. INTRODUCTION

Korea has undergone impressive economic growth in the past several decades, and this has led to a growing need for English education in order to maintain competitiveness. Traditionally, English learning occurred in offline classrooms in Korea, and that has not changed. However, now online education is also popular among university students because of the convenience it offers. The Korean government has set policies in place for how English should be taught as well as how online learning must be structured. This causes some challenges that are unique to the South Korean learning environment.

II. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SOUTH KOREA

The field of English language teaching evolved from the Grammar Translation Method in the 1800s to the Direct Method in 1900, to the Audiolingual Method in 1950. In the 1970s, communicative approaches came into practice, of which the most famous is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Currently in the field of English language teaching, CLT is still the most popular and highly regarded among experts and teachers alike.

The sixth and seventh versions of Korea's national curriculum mandated a CLT based English teaching approach but did not really consider the speaking proficiency of its teachers [1]. Additionally, testing in Korea is highly focused on rote memorization, and the backwash effect of the college entrance exam, of which English is one of the four subjects [2], is extremely strong, in that there is social stratification based on one's university degree basically lasting a lifetime [3]. Thus, because of that as well as sociocultural issues, teachers and students tend to prefer the Grammar Translation Method (Kim, 2005, as cited in Johnson [4]) despite the government's mandate.

Meurant [5] suggests that because of the global economy, if Korea wishes to be competitive, digital literacy in English needs to be implemented in English language teaching. In terms of technology, Korea is the most wired country in the world [6], and its 3G coverage is impressive with hotspots in most cities virtually on every block [5], but many language labs in Korea still comprise a teacher-centered classroom of one computer per student with desks fixed in strict rows, where each student is focused on their computer screen rather than on interacting with peers. This is one example of how classrooms that appear to be highly technologically equipped are not being used in line with the government's CLT policy. Ironically, classrooms with no multimedia resources often offer an environment more conducive to student-student interactions through pair or group work, which help students negotiate meaning so that they can notice the gap in their linguistic abilities, scaffold each other, and make improvements in their English proficiency.

Another reason a communicative approach is not pervasive in South Korea is that high school students do not perceive English as a useful tool for communication but rather as a subject to be mastered for university placement. Kim [7] used a cross-sectional quantitative approach utilizing a questionnaire to investigate attitudes and motivation of 1,037 Korean high school students. Kim found competitive motivation among peers to be excessive in comparison with instrumental motivation, which is motivation to learn English in order to attain a concrete result, such as getting a good job. This is somewhat surprising because Korean students are highly

focused on getting high test scores in order to succeed in life, yet they view surpassing their peers as more vital. This is likely due to the fact that the majority of Korean educational environments, including the college entrance exam, uses norm-referenced scoring.

In Korea, there are 21 cyber universities and approximately 100,000 cyber students [8]. English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught at many of Korea's online universities, and as with offline teaching, communicative approaches are not pervasive. Additionally, e-learning itself offers many exciting possibilities for teaching and learning, but in Korea there are some distinctive characteristics that impede the learning environment from fully benefiting from what e-learning has to offer.

III. OVERVIEW OF ADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING

Marc [9] states that one advantage of e-learning is that it puts the focus on individual learners' needs rather than on those of the teachers or institutions. In fact, Holmes and Gardner [10] purport that the main advantage of online education is that it is student-centered. Another commonly touted benefit of online learning is the aspect of flexibility it affords, in that students can study anywhere and at any time [11].

Similarly, it is said to provide learners the opportunity for self-pacing, meaning the asynchronous nature of online learning allows students to study at their own pace [12]. Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, and Yeh [13] developed an integrated model to investigate the most important factors that affect learners' satisfaction in online learning and collected questionnaires from 295 participants using a stepwise multiple regression analysis. They found that course flexibility was significant, which aligned with previous findings from Arbaugh [15]. They also mentioned the importance of self-pacing opportunities in learning, especially considering that many online learners have jobs, family and other obligations.

Online learning also makes it possible to provide learners access to a huge amount of information [10]. Furthermore, it allows for more student-student interaction opportunities through the use of discussion boards, which helps students who may be afraid of talking to others to get more involved and increase their communicative practice. Wagner, Hassanein, and Head [15] further assert that this increased possibility for interactivity is also a benefit for the interactions between teachers and students online.

Moreover, the online learning environment is said to allow teachers to act more as guides instead of being the all-knowing sage on the stage [16]. Also, given that many online courses incorporate video lectures, this allows students the opportunity to watch the videos as many times as they want in order to review the material [17]. Furthermore, online education offers many ways for teachers to provide learners instant feedback [18].

IV. CHALLENGES IN THE KOREAN CONTEXT

1. Challenge 1: Primary focus on video lectures

Korean online education at the university level puts the main focus on video lectures in all classes, and EFL classes are no exception. This suits the traditional teacher-fronted classroom approach to learning and thus is what students expect whether in an offline or online course setting. However, it goes counter to a communicative approach such as CLT. Whether or not institutions or individual instructors view video lectures as the best aspect to have students focus on is immaterial, as the government requires cyber universities to have a minimum of a 75-minute video lecture for each course each week. Additionally, the typical course load for online Korean students is five to six courses per semester, which means they theoretically spend seven to nine hours just watching video lectures. Given that most online Korean students are also working or taking care of families, this leaves little time for auxiliary activities such as posting on discussion forums in order to interact with other students online.

Koreans have longer working hours than people in any other developed country, and although the government recently reduced maximum weekly working hours from 68 to 52 [19], in many cases this rule is ignored. Thus, even the notion of students watching the video lectures multiple times is a bit farfetched in the Korean context, considering the high course load and the intense work life of many students. In fact, it is not uncommon for students to hit the play button on the video lecture and then walk away to do something else, letting the learning management system (LMS) log the student's viewing of the lecture, as it is also required that students watch 75% of the video lectures in order to pass a course. Thus, in South Korea, this focus on video lectures does not provide a student-centered learning environment where the teachers are guides rather than the focus; nor does it make it likely that students will watch the lectures multiple times to increase their learning.

A related issue is that the video lectures for any given week must be watched within a two-week period in order for students to receive credit for having watched them. This is meant to help keep students on track, but essentially it detracts from the flexibility and self-pacing aspects that online learning is meant to afford learners. While it is true that online learners in Korea can study in any location they prefer, they must do so within a rather inflexible timeframe.

2. Challenge 2: Learning management systems

Online universities in Korea create their own proprietary learning management systems rather than adopting more popular versions used in other countries such as Blackboard, Moodle, or Canvas. Creating an LMS is an expensive endeavor, so once one is established, universities do not want to pour money into newer versions and are often slow to make improvements to said systems. As an example, the discussion forums on Korean learning management systems make student-student interactions quite cumbersome. Ideally, to promote student-student interaction and to facilitate a somewhat communicative approach to online language learning, instructors would assign students the task of writing weekly on the discussion board and replying to their peers. However, it is nearly impossible for an instructor to do so and have time to check and respond to students because of a design flaw in the interface.

On a typical non-Korean LMS discussion forum, the posts appear in a thread. One person, for example the teacher, posts a question, and then others make a reply. Thus, the teacher and learners can easily scroll through a page of posts seamlessly as on any other website. This means an individual could easily read 15 responses on one page without ever having to navigate to another page. However, on a Korean LMS, that is not the case. One person posts to start a topic, and then any subsequent replies appear in their own separate threads. Essentially, this means that if a teacher posts a topic and asks students to reply, in order to view 15 students' replies to the original posts, the teacher must click one time to get to a student's post, and another time to get back to the main page, resulting in 30 clicks, as compared to one click in the former example. This is incredibly tedious and time consuming and greatly reduces the likelihood of both student-student and teacher-student interactions on discussion boards, making anything resembling CLT in an online environment virtually inconceivable.

3. Challenge 3: Large class size

It is not uncommon for online courses in Korea to surpass 300 students per course with one instructor. Given this, the instructor usually only has time to answer students' questions posted on the discussion board and does not have the luxury of creating discussions for students to answer for the reasons stated above. Additionally, when assignments are due, providing individualized feedback is an extremely onerous task with such a large class size. As a result, when giving subjective assignments to students, most instructors either simply assign a completion score to students for having submitted the assignment; alternately, many instructors assign the work of scoring and/or providing feedback to a teaching assistant. Thus, any feedback students get is typically not coming from the instructor.

One solution some instructors employ is to assign a completion grade to all students and to provide a few samples of assignments with individualized feedback. For example, out of 300 assignments, three submissions might be chosen, and feedback for those three would be shared with all students. While this is better than nothing, it hardly qualifies as individualized instruction, which is one of the alleged benefits of online education. It is true that some instructors do endeavor to give personalized feedback to each student, but unfortunately, because students are not accustomed to that, some do not even check the feedback. While Brinegar [20] found that 40.7% of Korean online students considered it extremely important to receive feedback from the instructor, 16.6% reported that they never checked the feedback.

Challenge 4: Low self-efficacy and self-regulation

Self-efficacy is related to a person's belief in their inherent ability to accomplish goals or basically how well one can take action to get things done in a specific situation [21]. Self-efficacy is important because it determines to what extent students will persevere in challenging situations. For example, those with high self-efficacy will put in the needed effort and are more likely to persevere in the face of hardship, whereas those with low self-efficacy are more likely to give up and quit [22].

In a Korean context, Bong [23] found that EFL learners with performance-avoidance goals, in other words trying to avoid performing worse than peers, had low self-efficacy and placed lower value on English. Lee and Lee [24] also studied self-efficacy in the Korean EFL context and found that individuals with a mastery goal orientation, meaning learners who wanted to improve skills and abilities, had higher self-efficacy. Hsieh and Kang [25] did a study to determine what Korean EFL learners ascribed their success or failures to in their English classes. They administered questionnaires to 192 ninth-grade English learners in Korea and found a positive correlation between language achievement and self-efficacy. They also found that students who were successful were more likely to attribute their test results to their own ability and effort, in contrast to those with lower self-efficacy who had a tendency to attribute test results to external factors.

Kim, Wang, Ahn and Bong [26] did a study using a questionnaire administered to 197 undergraduate university students who were enrolled in English-mediated courses. They divided learners into three categories: low self-efficacy, medium self-efficacy, and high self-efficacy. They found that only 31% of the learners were in the high self-efficacy group. Self-efficacy is highly related to self-regulation, which entails an individual being in control of their own thoughts and behaviors for the purposes of reaching a goal. For example, self-regulated

learners are autonomous and regulate their actions toward self-improvement rather than primarily relying on outside sources for direction. Several researchers have found that self-regulated learning is highly correlated to learner performance ([27]; [28]; [29]).

Online learning can be very demanding for students in any country, but the challenge in Korea is compounded by the fact that students are accustomed to teacher-centered education, which means wholly depending on the teacher for guidance and instruction; this translates to low autonomy and self-efficacy. Although most online students attending cyber universities are adults, they still rely on the teacher to tell them what to do and frequently ask their professors for advice, even well beyond the time they graduate. The esteem given to instructors is so great that many adults still return to their elementary schools from time to time to bestow their gratitude to a teacher they had decades ago. While this is a positive side of Korean culture, it also demonstrates the great deference given to teachers and the reason students find it difficult to have self-efficacy and self-regulation, both of which are highly necessary for success in online learning environments.

V. CONCLUSION

Although Korea has an impressive technological infrastructure and the national curriculum dictates the use of a communicative approach in English education, there are several factors that decrease the purported benefits of online education in Korea. These include but are not limited to the backwash effect of the college entrance exam, a long history of teacher-centered instruction, universities making their own learning management systems rather than adopting those made by specialized educational organization, large class size in online universities, and low self-regulation and self-efficacy among Korean learners.

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