The Cure for English Fever?
Stories and Self-Selected Reading in English

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KAERA Research Forum 1(4): 41-47. 2015
http://www.k-aera.org/research-forum/

Abstract

There is some justification for "English fever" in Korea, but the approaches taken to improve English are not effiicient or practical. We suggest Korea consider approaches based on "The Comprehension Hypothesis" and we present evidence from studies done in Korea showing that this approach is efficient and effective. Outside the class, we suggest Korea consider investing in English libraries, and not English Villages.

It is well-known that Korea is experiencing a serious case of "English fever," an intense desire to make sure that its citizens, especially children, become highly proficient in English.

Of course, some of this concern is well justified. Without question, English has become in world's second language.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH

Airlines use English as their common language of communication. In fact, the International Civil Aviation Organization mandated that starting in 2008, all Air Traffic Controllers and flight crew members working with international flights must be proficient in English (http://www.aviation-esl.com/ICAO_English.htm).

English has become the language of science. An editorial in the journal Molecular Biology of the Cell (Drubin and Kellog, 2012) declared that "English is now used almost exclusively as the language of science" (http://www.molbiolcell.org/content/23/8/1399.full). In 1977, 83% of the articles cited in the Science Citation Index (SCI) were written in English (Garfeld, 1998). By 2005, this percentage had increased to 98.7% (Leydesdorff, 2008). This is a burden on scholars

world-wide who are not native speakers of English and those working in Korea are no exception.

English is also the most used language on the internet. According to data gathered up to December, 2013, 801 million internet users use English (Chinese is number two, with 649 million users, followed by Spanish, with 222 million users). 58% of internet users use English on the internet (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm).

APPROACHES TO ENGLISH

The perception that English is important is real. Every program and innovation to improve English in Korea in recent years, however, has been either contrary to what we know about language acquisition or is far too expensive and inefficient. We argue here from the point of view of theory, because there has been no serious effort to evaluate the impact of these innovations. The alternative we present here, however, has a great deal of empirical backing.

Schools in Korea are insisting on more and earlier English classes, and a large percentage of children attend extra classes outside of school (Hagwan) (Jeon, 2012), Most of these classes, according to our observations, use traditional methodology. The philosophy seems to be that if the traditional methods didn't produce results, let's do them harder.

Traditional methods are based on the "skill-building" hypothesis, the hypothesis that we learn language and develop literacy by first consciously learning grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary. This conscious knowledge, it is assumed, becomes "automatic" when we practice, which means using the new rules and vocabulary in speaking and writing. We "fine-tune" our knowledge of these rules when we get our errors corrected.

Before moving on to other views, there are good reasons why the Skill-Building hypothesis is hopeless: The grammar rules to be consciously learned are too numerous and many are too complex to be learned, and they have too many exceptions. Similarly, there are too many words to be learned.

Korea adopted a "communicative approach" to English in 1994 (Park, 2009), a method that in our view made things worse: In addition to grammatical knowledge, students had to master the rules of "communicative competence," rules of social appropriateness, increasing the burden significantly.

In addition, many forms of the communicative approach rely on the "Comprehensible Output" hypothesis, the view that we acquire language by attempting to communicate with others, making errors and thereby encountering misunderstanding, and then correcting ourselves and arriving at correct forms when we succeed in making our conversational partners understand.

There are serious problems with the Comprehensible Output hypothesis. Studies show that language acquirers do not produce enough output for this mechanism to have any real effect. Also, language acquirers hardly ever produce the kind of output needed for the Comprehensible Output hypothesis is work: Even when second language acquirers do talk, they rarely make the kind of adjustments the Comprehensible Output hypothesis claims are useful for acquiring new forms (Krashen, 2003; pp: 60-61).

THE COMPREHENSION HYPOTHESIS

Our suggestion is that Korea consider approaches based on the Comprehension Hypothesis. The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we subconsciously acquire language and develop literacy when we understand what we hear and read, when we obtain "comprehensible input."

There are important differences between the Comprehension Hypothesis and the others: According to approaches based on skill-building, we first consciously learn the components of language (e.g. vocabulary and grammar), and then, if we practice enough, we develop mastery of the language. In contrast, according to the Comprehension Hypothesis, mastery of the components of language is the result, not the cause of language acquisition.

Another important difference is that skill-building approaches are typically painful: Few people are genuinely interested in learning grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary, and few enjoy struggling to apply rules in stressful interactions. In contrast, methods based on the Comprehension Hypothesis are more likely to be perceived as pleasant (Krashen 1994; 2003).

Comprehension-based language teaching has never lost in method comparison studies. Students in comprehension-based classes are consistently far better on communicative tests and do just as well, and often slightly better, on form-based tests (Krashen, 2003).

THE VALUE OF READ ALOUDS AND SELF-SELECTED READING

The most effective beginning second and foreign language classes are those which are filled with comprehensible input, in which students are not forced to speak, in which errors are not corrected, and which involve students in interesting interactions: They include beginning classes which include stories, read alouds, and often include time for students to engage in self-selected reading.

Reviews of these studies are available in several places (e.g. Krashen, 2003). We focus here on those studies carried out in Korea, with students in elementary school in English as a Foreign Language classes.

Table one presents a list of studies carried out by the first author and her colleagues in Korea in recent years. All were done in elementary schools (grades three to six) and all involved either reading aloud in English, pleasure reading, or a combination of both. Duration of the treatment ranged from 12 to 24 weeks, a relatively short time, as the results of previous studies suggest that these programs are more effective if they are long term (Krashen, 2011). Time set aside for recreational reading and/or story telling ranged from 15 to 40 minutes per session.

Table One: Description of studies done in Korea

Study	Grd	N (Exp/Co)	D (Mon)	RA	SSR	RT & Act. /per week	Reading Materials
Cho, K. & Seo, S. (2001)	5	120 (79/41)	5	Yes	No	40 m. 2/wk	Children's Storybooks
Cho, K. & Choi, S. (2003)	3	64 (32/32)	6	Yes	No	40 m. 2/wk	Children's Storybooks
Cho, K. & Kim, Hey J. (2004)	6	140 (70/70)	4	No	Yes	40 m.	Internet storybooks
Cho, K. & Kim, Hee J. (2005)	6	70 (35/35)	3	Yes	Yes	25-30 m.	Children's Newspapers
Cho, K. & Choi, D. (2008)	6	56 (28/28)	5	Yes	Yes	10-15 m. 2/wk RA/40 m. SSR	Children's Storybooks
Park, J.& Cho, K. (forthcoming)	3	68 (34/34)	4	Yes	No	15 m. 3/wk	Children's Storybooks

Note. Grd= Grade; N=Number of subjects; Mon=Month; D= Duration; RA=Read-Aloud (to children); SSR= Sustained Silent Reading; RT & Act.= Reading Time & Activity.
Table from: Cho and Krashen (forthcoming)

During the read-aloud sessions, the teacher discussed the cover and title of the book before reading the book to the children, and discussed the illustrations while reading the book. Follow-up activities included word games, jigsaw reading, choral/shared reading, role-play, and bookmaking.

Self-selected reading was done as "SSR": Sustained Silent Reading. During SSR time, sudents read books they wanted to read. There was no accountability after reading and there were no book reports. Occasionally, as was done after read-aloud sessions, students were encouraged to use words or content from the reading in word games or in book making activities.

Comparison students participated in traditional instruction only.

Table 2 presents the results for read-aloud and SSR studies separately in terms of effect sizes. A positive effect size means that the students in the read-aloud/reading group outperformed comparison students. According to accepted practice, an effect size of .2 is a small effect, .50 is a medium effect and .8 or larger is a large effect (Cohen, 1988). An effect size of 1.0 means that the experimental group outperformed the comparisons by one standard deviation.

Table Two: Results of studies (Effect sizes)

	Vocabulary	R.C.	Combined
Read-Aloud			
Cho, K. & Seo, S. (2001)	0.31		
Cho, K & Choi, S. (2003)	0.57		
Park, J. & Cho, K. (f.c.)	0.38	1.14	
SSR only			
Cho, K. & Kim, Hey J. (2004)	0.32	0.46	
Read-Aloud & SSR			
Cho, K. & Kim, Hee J. (2005)		1.31	
Cho, K. & Choi, D. (2008)			0.52

Note. R.C.= Reading Comprehension; Combined=Vocabulary and R.C.
Table from Cho and Krashen (forthcoming)

There was a clear and consistent superiority for the groups hearing stories and doing self-selected reading. For the four vocabulary measures, the mean effect size was .40. For the three reading comprehension tests, the mean effect size was .97. The mean for the four results from the three read-aloud studies, regardless of measure, was .65, and for both SSR studies (four results) the mean was .63. For all eight measures combined, the mean was .65. These results are very close to effect sizes reported for revious studies of reading aloud and sustained silent reading in both first and second language development (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Elley, 1991; Krashen, 2011, Nakanishi, 2014).

OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL: ENGLISH VILLAGES AND THE ALTERNATIVE

Adoption of methods based on the Comprehension Hypothesis also means different ways of helping English students outside of school. Currently, several countries have established "English villages,' small towns or resorts in which only English is spoken, where, for a fee, visitors can immerse themselves in English. The Seoul English village was started in 2004 and there are several others in Korea. The Korean government supports English Villages because they feel they will diminish the number of Koreans who go abroad (or who send their children abroad) to improve their English, a drain on the Korean economy. English villages, we are told, are real communities in which only English can be spoken, a place where students of English can go to practice their English and feel like they “have left Korea behind.”

It must be pointed out, however, that the villages are not real. The buildings are simulations of banks, post offices, airline offices, etc. and the interactions are simulations: The "residents" of the English village in Korea are actually English teachers trained to play different roles, such as policemen. They also give classes: The Seoul English village offers classes with a nonacademic flavor (games, cooking, art broadcasting) [http://seoulenglishvillage.weebly.com/classes.html].

To our knowledge there have been no formal evaluations of the English Villages. We have no idea if they are really helping English language acquisition.

Even if visiting an English village does help English language development, can English villages realistically make a contribution to English education in Korea? Students go for short visits (three days, with longer "camps" during the summer [http://seoulenglishvillage.weebly.com/about-sev.html]). If each village can serve 500 students, and all villages are completely full at all times, and if there are 30 English villages in Korea (data from Jeon, 2012), they can accommodate about a half million students per month or six million per year, about the number of children in grades in which English is taught in Korea.

This calculation assumes that each child can get to a village one time. While English villages appear to be less expensive than living in an English-speaking country, attending for more than a single day can be expensive. According to Jeon (2012), attending a long-term camp can cost 1.8 million won (US $1700).

Jeon (2012) notes that after some initial enthusiasm after English villages were first established, "the popularity of English villages was short-lived. Most of them suffered financial strain due to a shortage of students … In 2007, according to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, English villages across the country lost 21 billion won" (p. 401).

LIBRARIES

There is a simple, low-cost and highly effective alternative: Libraries, with extensive collections of books, magazines, and comics in English. Study after study has confirmed that the amount of self-selected free voluntary reading done is related to second language (and first language) development (Krashen, 2004), and libraries are a convenient (and economical) place to find interesting reading material for those of all social classes. Libraries can serve students of all socio-economic levels at zero cost to the students throughout their school careers as well as throughout the lifetime.

There are some English libraries in Korea; the Busan English Library contains about 40,000 English books, including 1000 comic books, a good step in the right direction (see e.g. http://www.bel.go.kr/site_eng/lib_intro/).

DANGERS OF ENGLISH FEVER

A real danger of English fever is the neglect of the first language, a fear that is justified by the tendency to value the acquisition of English over the continuing development of Korean. This is a tragedy. It is true that nearly all scientific articles are written in English,

but not everything worth reading is in English: We must not deny students the wisdom of literature and philosophy written in Korean. Also, advanced competence in English does not require massive investment of school time: Our goal in second language pedagogy is to develop intermediates, which means enough competence to understand at least some authentic input, and the knowledge to know how to improve on one's own. This does not require years and years of hard study. There is plenty of time for Korean.

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