

Developing Congruence in Communicative Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

The difference between the Korean system of teaching English and the American system of teaching English is a matter of compelling interest and extreme frustration. It lends itself well to analogy. Our favorite is that of the bicycle. The person who studies “the bicycle” can sit at his desk drawing pristine models in which wheels and gears play a grand part, and can discuss sprockets and gear ratios with sagacity and no emotion. The person who studies bicycle riding—well, there’s another matter. That person will be involved in the embarrassment of scraped knees, torn pants, falling down and checking furtively to see how many people saw him fall and, more importantly, who they were. He must be constantly on guard, trying to achieve balance between himself and his machine, between himself and the path he seeks to follow, between himself and others he may encounter. The same is true for the student of a foreign language. If he but studies the language, as an artifact, so to

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speak, walks around it, looks at its texture and how it works, he can retain his full dignity. But once he begins to converse in the language, he is exposed to the necessities mentioned above: the balance between his thoughts and the language vehicle, between the path he seeks to take, and, most important, between himself and others he may encounter. He will suffer awkwardness and public embarrassment, and once he plunges in, the idea of face will have to be put aside for a period of time—at least in foreign language, for he must learn as a child with a child's willingness.

2. Developing Congruence Between the English Teachers and the Korean Students

2.1. Teacher's Role

The difference in American and Korean teaching systems has something to do with cultural norms but is mainly due to an historical glitch in teaching styles. Up to recent times foreign language was taught as an academic subject. For most people there was seldom a need to use the language in conversation. Koreans, up till now, have taught English for passing tests and studying language—form and substance, literature and linguistics. Most of these studies, including academic papers, have been in the native language—sprockets and gears, no embarrassment. But globalization has become the watchword of burgeoning industry and English its lingua franca. The

information highway is part of this trend and its signs are written in English. Because of these changes, the need for communicative language learning quickly outstripped the need for academic language. In response to this need, native-speaker language teachers flooded the country. These native speakers, mainly from America, a multi-lingual country, and Canada, a bi-lingual country, have long struggled with the difficulties of teaching a living language and developed humanistic styles of teaching for communicative teaching. New programs incorporating both the personhood and the teaching styles of these teachers need to be developed.

Systems congruence is the administrative problem, but, for most teachers, curriculum congruence is an equal if not greater problem. In most of the English classes in Korean universities, freshman students and English teachers are equally bewildered. Once again we will fall back on analogy to describe the problem: the problem is one of docking. We can think of an old-fashioned ferry, or even of a space vehicle. When it arrives, it must carefully lock into the waiting mechanism so passengers can disembark. But the vessel carrying Korean students into Language Centers has no recognizable matching characteristics to hook into the landing stage provided by English language teachers. Teachers stand ready to teach students with 6 years of English study behind them while students struggle to understand when the teacher says, "take out a pencil and paper." Most students are unable to say "hello" with confidence, much less admit their needs. If they could talk, cultural tradition, embarrassment, saving face, would still leave them "drowning" in conversation classes while their

teachers stand by unable to reach them. So we cannot rest until congruence is established between the students and the English teachers. English teachers should realize that every small detail of the teacher's attitude is of prime importance. The student must be embraced without equivocation. His personhood must be acknowledged in all of its variety and otherness—his degree of maturity and skill, his response to the teacher, his cultural values, his personal and ethnic characteristics—with respect, accompanied by a belief in his human potential. This may sound like a grandiose expectation of behavior, but not so. With a student load of 40-50 students in each class, one-to-one conversation is at a high premium; however, letting students know their value as human beings does not require a great many words; it requires only a gesture or a glance—a glance that contains a whole world of belief. In other words, it is the attitude that requires vigilance. The acknowledgement of another person takes only seconds. The practise of dialogue is simple, the underlying attitude slightly more complex.

The teacher's role in a foreign country is complicated by his/her inability to speak the language and many ESL classrooms are in developing countries where trust is limited and time is of the essence. The survival mode does not lend itself to compassion and sensitivity on the part of either teacher or student, although there is no dearth of emotion. That is why the attitude of the teacher must be open and clear. There is no time for lack of respect and trust. In the EFL classroom, the teacher (especially foreigners) must set up a climate that is honest and open, free of self-will and

self-aggrandizement, but not naive. This mode of relating requires more than tolerance or acceptance. It requires self-respect and quiet strength as a basis for respectful acknowledgement of another. Although it may be even more difficult for the Asian teacher of conversational English to understand and practise dialogic teaching because of the tradition in which h/she was educated, Asian teachers bring something to the classroom no native speaker can offer—the experience of learning English as a second language. In the dialogic stance, all instincts for love and power must be focused in the educative imagination. Setting aside false selflessness, the teacher must face the student with inner power. Instead of dominance, the teacher must leave all sense of superiority behind and meet the student with an attitude of mutual respect and honesty. In this crucible, false ego is burned away and a meeting can take place that will form a new relationship in which mentorship can begin.

The essence of mentorship is recognition and development of potential. Learners can be seen as having two levels of intellectual development—an actual level and a potential one. This is especially true for EFL students because of the potential inherent in language learning. Collaborative learning—learning with peers and a mentor—develops learning potential, whereas teaching for testing only seeks the level of actual development. Classroom design, beginning with a dialogic attitude and following its natural course of reflection and responsive collaboration, can provide a risk-free cooperative learning environment with the greatest range of learning possibilities.

For all ESL teachers there is more than one reason to

understand and practise the dialogic relationship, although it is a task which requires rigorous self-honesty and a relaxed vigilance. The first and most obvious reason to learn dialogical teaching is humanistic—the responsibility of every teacher to recognize and respond to each student with respect. A second and more complex reason is the teacher's responsibility to model the ego strength and absolute respect for others in which unexpected information can be accepted and incorporated for personal growth. In the same way the teacher keeps him/herself intact while acknowledging the student, the language learner must keep his identity intact while acknowledging the cultural and personal structures of the second language. The knowledge he acquires, the flow of symbol and sound, must become an adjunct to his ongoing personality structure without unseating his already established identity. That strong sense of self must remain intact as a source of strength to support a second voice in a new language and culture.

2.2. Student's Side

Having set up the classroom by describing the teacher's stance, the focus of attention must be turned to the student. Speech is the child's natural form of communication. With maturity and education comes more complex subject matter and some difficulties in self-expression. Finally each person develops an individual style. So when students learn a new language and cultural point of view, they are not starting fresh. Within their already developed style in their native

speech and culture they must develop a new voice or persona in order to interpret events in the context of the new culture.

This, of course, creates inner conflict. Personal identity originates in the environment of the native language, where it is nurtured within the family, and reflects family values and habits. At first this identity, or, as Guiora et al. (1972, 1980) names it, "language ego", is expressed only in the intimate voice, but as it grows richer and more varied, it also becomes more public, more attuned to the outside world. Over time and usage, the native voice acquires a range of suitability from formal to vernacular according to cultural mores, individual custom, and personal choice.

In learning foreign language conversation, the process is almost reversed. There is no time for the natural development of style and form. Instead, beginning speech is public, that is, among strangers—performance-based rather than intimate. It is only when small group and pair work are introduced in the classroom that an approximation of the intimacy of family evolves.

It is common to separate classes into small groups to cope with numbers, but in fact group formation could be used as a deliberate strategy for nurturing variability. Tarone's (1980, 1983, 1988) variability research reveals that in vernacular speech, monitoring is low and the genuine attempt to communicate is high. In formal language, where the attempt to impress is as high or higher than the desire to communicate, a great deal of monitoring is required. This slows down fluency and highlights mistakes. On the level of performance, fear, loss of face, acting out cultural taboos (i.e., covering the face when

smiling) and other such encumbrances are a large factor in the success or failure of language learning.

In the second language, beginning speech develops out of necessity in this public experience and students develop what can be called the public personality. Most EFL students turn to each other like shipwreck victims, extending immediate intimacy to their fellow sufferers, nurturing each other in peer groups. The group quickly becomes a safe place from which to launch the still-necessary public personality. When the desire to communicate with particularity, as in vernacular speech, is carried over with support from the small group into the larger arena of public performance, major barriers can be surmounted.

In order to be successful in the development of a nest or family situation in the classroom, a strong sense of identity is of prime importance. As mentioned before, the identity, and therefore the ego, is developed within the birth language and culture. The ego is at once the supporter and the downfall of people of all ages. But nowhere is this more true than in second language learners. It is not easy to give up even a little piece—familiar sounds, smells, tastes, touching points, sights—of our birthright. In childhood, protection comes from being in a familiar place with a familiar group. But for children nothing is set in stone, and when those entities change, assimilation is an easy and natural choice. Ego boundaries are not yet fully defined.

As we grow older, we develop ego boundaries and a well defined sense of self. The world separates into inner and outer bailiwicks—places we feel safe as opposed to a wider world full of surprises—not always pleasant, not always safe. Slowly but

surely we begin putting down markers to find our way home, to that place where we feel secure—where we can say this is where I belong. Usually that feeling is grounded in the symbols of familiarity, the language and our native land.

In times of turmoil, personal or general, we defend that territory. If we are not aware and very careful, ego boundaries can become walls. We may lock out those who are different, but in doing so we may also lock ourselves in. The shell enclosing our ego is built so slowly, so naturally, and seems so right, we are the last to learn of its existence. This natural ego may be the last barrier to language learning and the most difficult one for the second language teacher to overcome.

Community social behavior, such as gossip or ostracism may reinforce such fears, therefore particular care must be taken to ground the ego during the learning process. In the classroom, a geographical grounding, such as the planned seating place, name tags marked with a nickname in the new language, hands-on projects posted on the walls, and, of course, praise for group efforts, are all part of the grounding process. Group interaction from this strong base can help the individual student accept and overcome affective barriers such as the fear of failing, and cultural norms of self-effacement and conformity. Thus partnership and small groups form both a safe place and a support group where the student can act from the secure base of a healthy first language ego environment to develop the public personality he will be required to use with native speakers from other cultures.

Finally, the language itself, that “slippery customer” must be understood in all its variety, or variability. Part of the fear in

conversation comes from the tension between formal and informal speech. Formal speech is pre-planned and carefully monitored, while informal speech is spontaneous and behavioral. In formal speech pre-planning lends a sense of security but the need for consistent monitoring creates tension; in informal speech the desire to communicate on any terms lends a focus that overcomes intellectualizing, but the lack of pre-planning creates insecurity. Small group work can defuse that tension so that communication can take place. Like an information gap, this tension, though discomforting, provides a healthy climate for learning. By deliberately setting up opposing parameters of language usage, the teacher can take advantage of the vitality typically present in the right use of language. It can be hypothesized that the student absorbs this vitality at a level deeper than conscious understanding. To go one step further, we may conjecture that this deep conditioning charges the horizontal aspects of rote learning with the vertical dynamics of cultural density.

The administration, the teacher, the student and the language. Together—in every sense of the word—they comprise a climate for learning that has all the potential of our times. Examined separately, we can see the possible weakness in each element: the teacher's natural desire for privacy, for power, for love; the student's emotional, social, and cognitive barriers to learning, a language that is filled with tension and change. The design and practice of classroom teaching has an inherent vitality spawned by each of its entities, and the potential for exploration and research. It is our job to make sure that we move forward surely, not throwing out the baby with the bath

water, but making sure that old habits and old ideas do not stand in the way of knowledge.

3. Soong Sil University Communicative English Program

Soong Sil University opened the Language Center in 1995, to provide quality language education to Soong Sil University students and the surrounding community residents. One of the center's core programs, the Freshmen Communicative English Program, was designed to teach the whole freshmen body English not as an artifact or an academic subject but as a means of communication in real contexts. According to the analogy used in the beginning of this paper, the objective of the program is to teach the students not about "the bicycle" but about riding "the bicycle."

The Freshmen Communicative English Program offers a required, credit-bearing, one-year conversation course to more than 2,500 Soong Sil University first-year students. The students meet three times per week for 50-minute classes to improve their communicative proficiency with native English-speaking teachers. The classes have an average of 25 students each, so classes are small and conversation opportunities are enhanced. Placement of the students is done through placement testing.

The curriculum for the program is based on the philosophy that students should learn a living language from native speakers employing humanistic styles of teaching. The students are placed in situations in which they should use the language

as much as possible through communicative activities such as problem-solving tasks, dialogues, interviews, role plays, and language games. Group work, conversation practice and appropriate English used according to situation are stressed. Classes are designed to be as fun and informative as possible and taught by the teachers using the "total immersion" teaching method, in which only English is used from the beginning.

All classes are taught by native speakers of English - all of them having training or experience in teaching English as a foreign/second language. Most of the teachers are from the U.S. with a few coming from other English-speaking countries such as Australia and Canada. Due to the nature of the program, the relationship between the teachers and the students is one of the most crucial elements in accomplishing its goal. Not only are textbooks and supplementary materials for the program carefully selected but also the special rapport formed between the teachers and the students is emphasized in the Freshmen Communicative English Program.

Evaluation of the students' progress and performance is mainly based on their actual participation and performance in classroom activities, individual interviews, and group projects, measuring their communicative use rather than academic knowledge of the language. Throughout the academic year, by sharing ideas at workshops for instance, the faculty constantly strives to learn and develop new ways of teaching which will enable them to reach the students and encourage them to communicate in English with confidence.

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Abstract

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This paper deals with the problem of teaching communicative English to Korean university students by native English speaking teachers. With the globalization drive in recent years, Korean universities have recognized the importance of communicative English, setting up English classes to teach the students communicative language skills by employing native English speaking teachers. However, the results have not been satisfactory, because of the divergences between the Korean students and the English teachers. To narrow the gaps between the two parties, it is suggested that the English teachers show more humanistic attitude towards the students. Developing and practising dialogic relationships with the students, based on mutual respect and honesty, is suggested as an effective way of overcoming difficulties in the classroom.

Also, to overcome the affective barriers to foreign language learning, small group interactions are encouraged so that the students can learn foreign languages from the secure base of a healthy first language ego environment in order to develop the public personality they will use with native speakers from other cultures.

Lastly, a new communicative English teaching and learning program at Soong Sil University is introduced to show how the above mentioned suggestions are substantiated in the program.