

English via the Internet

Sook Whan Cho*

1. Introduction

A couple of weeks ago we Koreans celebrated Thanksgiving called "chu-sok" in Korean. The night before Thanksgiving I went to a market to buy Korean rice cake. There was a long line-up at the rice cake store; more than 20 people were standing in line. Someone asked the store owner a question, and I heard a dialogue as follows, as in (1).

(1) Dialogue at a Rice-cake Store (September 25, 1996):

Customer: What's inside the song-pyun?

(Note: "song-pyun" = a type of rice cake like a dumpling with various kinds of filling (sweets, beans, sesame seeds, etc.) inside)

Owner: Whatever fillings you can imagine.

At this moment, I was anxious to know exactly what kinds of fillings she meant were in the cake, but I sensed that the other people in the line-up were not bothered too much by the owner's response, so I decided to be quiet. Then, a while later, a young lady asked a question.)

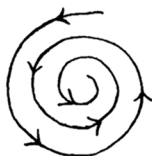
* Sogang University

Lady: Like what? What fillings exactly?
 Owner: Well, whatever is supposed to be good for you.

Well, as you can imagine, I was totally frustrated, still not knowing what's inside the songpyun, the dumpling, unable to decide which kind of dumpling I should buy, since the owner would not respond directly to the question.

The dialogue we just observed indicates that perhaps Korean discourse pattern is "spiral" around the point, as pictured in (2), namely, that it is not straight to the point.

(2) Spiral Discourse Pattern:



The dialogue in (1) reminds us of Robert Kaplan who wrote in 1966 that different languages and their cultures have different patterns of written discourse. Kaplan proposed that Oriental written discourse, for example, follows a spiraling pattern as we just saw in (2) a minute ago while English discourse proceeds like a straight line as illustrated in (3).

(3) Straight Discourse Pattern:



As you all know, Kaplan's thesis I have just outlined has been under attack and is thought to be extremely simplistic and overgeneralized without investigating actual writing in English and Oriental languages. I agree. I do not think that Kaplan will provide an immediate answer as regards the motivation for and background behind the discourse pattern as exemplified in the dialogue at the rice-cake market.

Nevertheless, no one can deny the effect of one's native culture, or the consequence of the nation-specific schooling and teaching methods of writing, reading, thinking, asserting, arguing, and defending, among others. Today, in my talk, I would like to do two things. First, I would like to report on my study where I examined the Korean university students' writing development. Second, I am also going to make a proposal regarding a teaching method which I am going to call "English via the Internet," as outlined in (4).

- (4) As you can see in handout #(4), first of all, I would like to point out what I'm going to call "the Content Development Problem," namely that as noted in #(4a), "Beginning and intermediate level Korean students of English....."

a. The Content Development Problem:

Beginning and intermediate level Korean students of English at universities have difficulty in developing the contents that they write: They very often fail to illustrate, elaborate on, and explain the main points that they try to make - the problem to be called "*The Content Development Problem.*")

Secondly, I would like to propose that international writing exchanges through internet can provide a way to help the students to improve their skill in making themselves clear by properly developing their main content, the main points that they want to make. This proposal is outlined in (4b), as follows:

b. Proposal:

The individual writing exchange in the international environment activity via the Internet (- "*English via the Internet*") can help the students to explore the Content Development Problem.

2. The Content Development Problem

Recently, I have conducted two studies in order to examine the writing problems that the beginning and intermediate level university students of English in Korea may have.

2.1. Study One: Beginning Students of English

2.1.1. Purpose

As outlined in (5), this study investigates how beginning level students of English develop the content in writing.

(5) Purpose:

This study investigates how beginning level students of English develop the content in writing.

2.1.2. Methods

Subjects

As I noted in (6), fifteen non-English majors at Sogang University were observed in late March, 1996. These students were thought to be the "beginners" of writing on the grounds that they had taken no academic writing courses previously.

(6) Subjects:

Fifteen non-English majors at Sogang University were observed in late March, 1996. These students were thought to be the "beginners" of writing on the grounds that they had taken no academic writing courses previously.

Test

How were the students evaluated? Handout #7 gives you information about the procedure I took in collecting the students' writing samples.

The subjects were given a take-home writing assignment to write about 300 words describing an object (objects) or a person (people). The assignment was given about three weeks after the course began to be taught, and for these first three weeks the students were introduced to the basic skills in writing, such as paragraphing, organizing, and one rhetoric method "describing."

(7) Test:

The subjects were given a take-home writing assignment to write about 300 words describing an object (objects) or a person (people). The assignment was given about three weeks after the course began to be taught, and for these first three weeks the students had been introduced to the basic skills in writing, such as paragraphing, organizing, and one rhetoric method "describing."

Analysis

In evaluating the subjects' essays, I took into consideration the two general categories, "content" and "organization." I looked into these categories with a focus on some specific writing components as given in Table 1.

(8) Analysis: **Table 1**

Data Analysis: The Evaluation Categories

Category	Component
Content	a. thesis statement
	b. development of ideas through illustration, facts, and explanation
	c. opinions
Organization	a. effectiveness of introduction
	b. conclusion

2.1.3. Results

The results are summarized in Table 2.

(9) Results:**Table 2**

Frequencies of the Occurrences of Content and Organization Components in the Beginning Level Students

	Content		Organization	
	DEV	OPI	INT	CON
TS				
11/15 (73%)	6/15 (40%)	15/15 (100%)	11/15 (73%)	13/15 (87%)

(Note: TS=thesis statement; DEV=development of ideas;
OPI=opinions; INT=introduction; CON=conclusion)

2.1.4. Discussion

As you can see in Table 2, the subjects seemd to have most difficulty with developing the main content. Over 70% of the total wrote a thesis statement, an opinion, an introduction and a conclusion. On the other hand, the main content was not developed very well. only 6 essays out of total 15 (40%) contained a relatively well-developed main section. This means that 60% of the subjects failed to illustrate, explain, or elaborate on their main points.

2.2. Study Two: Intermediate Students of English

2.2.1. Purpose

As I noted in (10) in the handout, Study Two is concerned with how intermediate level students of English develop the content in writing.

(10) Purpose

Study Two is concerned with how intermediate level students of English develop the content in writing.

2.2.2. Methods

Subjects

Fifteen English majors at Sogang University were observed in early September, 1996. These students were thought to be the "intermediate" level students because they had taken at least one academic writing course in the past.

(11) Subjects

Fifteen English majors at Sogang University were observed in early September, 1996. These students were thought to be the "intermediate" level students in the sense that they had taken at least one academic writing course in the past.

Test

The subjects were given a take-home writing assignment choose a topic and write 400-500 words about it. This assignment was given in the first week of the semester as the very first assignment and hence, the students had no opportunity to be exposed to the writing skills involving organizing, rhetoric types, and the like. The students were examined two times: first, when they wrote the first draft, and secondly, when the subjects revised their first draft.

(12) Test

The subjects were given a take-home writing assignment to choose a topic and write 400 - 450 words. This assignment was given in the first week of the semester as the very first assignment and hence, the students had no opportunity to be exposed to the writing instructions involving organizing, rhetoric types, and the like. Students were told to write two versions on the same topic, first draft and revised.

(13) Analysis

(Same as in Table 1.)

2.2.3. Results(14) Results

Results are given in Table 3.

Table 3

First Draft:

Frequencies of the Occurrences of Content and Organization Components in the Intermediate Level Students

Content		Organization		
TS	DEV	OPI	INT	CON
9 (60%)	6 (40%)	15 (100%)	9 (60%)	15 (100%)

(Note: TS=thesis statement; DEV=development of ideas;
OPI=opinions; INT=introduction; CON=conclusion)

Recall that these intermediate level students had previously taken at least one academic writing course. Notice, however, these subjects' performance does not look very different from the beginning students' performance. Compare the figure in Table 2 with the results in Table 3. Both groups largely failed to properly develop the main content. Note that only 40% of the total, that is, only 6 students out of 15, did something about developing their main ideas.

This is the outcome of their first writing draft. Recall that this first draft was done in the first week of the semester, and the students were not given any instruction about how to compose before they did this assignment. Remember also that these students were given the opportunity to read my comments on their first version and to rewrite it. As you will see shortly, this intermediate group made an improvement in their second draft overall, yet they still seemed to have difficulty developing their main point. Please look at Table 4.

Table 4

Second Draft:

Frequencies of the Occurrences of Content and Organization Components in the Intermediate Level Students

TS	Content		Organization	
	DEV	OPI	INT	CON
12/15 (80%)	10/15 (67%)	15/15 (100%)	12/15 (80%)	15/15 (100%)

(Note: TS=thesis statement; DEV=development of ideas;

OPI=opinions; INT=introduction; CON=conclusion)

As you can see in Table 4, the subjects performed better

overall, particularly on writing a thesis statement and an introductory remark, now 80% of the total. Note, however, just 67% of the group developed the main content, and obviously this is not a very impressive figure, particularly considering the fact that as I mentioned a few minutes ago, these people had previously taken one academic writing course and were given the opportunity to read my comments written individually on their first draft and to revise it.

2.2.4. Writing Samples

Let me now show you a couple of writing samples in which the writer is not making himself/herself clear enough in his/her main discussion in the essay.

(A) The eyebrow our pet dog characterizes her and it makes me think that she is (an) unusual and mysterious dog. ... Her eyebrow...is thick and long. ...this white eyebrow reminds me of ...the guardian spirit of a mountain - his eyebrow is white, too. ...Also it makes me feel that *she is somewhat strict and obstinate* as Cho-Soon, the mayor of Seoul, [it] strengthens his image that he is honest and responsible....

(B) R lounge is my school's resting place.... It's very convenient to me (in many respects). First, when I am so hungry but busy, I can satisfy my hunger at there. In R lounge, we can eat many things: hot foods, snacks, fruits, drinks and so on. Second, ... Third, it's a good place to spend sparetime between lectures *There is always music, so I can study freely*. Besides, R lounge has many usefulness. So I like to spend time in there.

-
- (C) Television, a device used widely in this world, has many good and bad reasons. But mainly it gives out more bad reasons than good reasons. For instan(ce), television gives us entertainment in our spare time. It also gives us recent new about what is happening around us. ... *It spoils our children.* ... The worst problem is that *children can learn a lot of bad things* when watching television. Many children fight over watching a television shows. Therefore, children should not get very close with TV.
-

Note that all three writing samples above contain a topic sentence as underlined in each. The problem, however, is that the topic sentences are not developed in a coherent fashion. For example, it is not clear how the statement in (A) that “she is somewhat strict and obstinate” may support the dog being “unusual and mysterious.” The same problem is observed in (B). This author says that “[t]here is always music, so I can study freely,” but s/he does not explain why “music” and “free study” help the school lounge to be a “convenient” place. As regards sample (3), it is obvious that the author makes an attempt to illustrate his topic sentence by trying to argue that TV “spoils” children and children “can learn a lot of bad things.” Unfortunately, however, s/he is not explicit in explaining how children are “spoiled” and what “bad things” specifically children can learn via TV.

3. English via the Internet¹⁾

I would like to argue that Korean students or any other

1) Section 3 is based on the course “English through the Internet” at Sogang University. I would like to thank Professors William Burns, Michael Glass, and Kyung-sun Hong for providing me with valuable information and for discussing with me about their class experiences. ~

student who may have difficulty making themselves clear need to develop not just the writing technique but also the ideas bearing on a variety of issues, social, academic, political, cultural, and many others through a very active interaction with the people with different background. I would like to propose that one way to explore the possibilities is to try to talk to the people whose educational and cultural background is very different. English through the Internet can provide these students with one way to explore, I think. I would like to demonstrate one course offered at Sogang University where I teach, the course called "English through the Internet."

3.1. Course Level

This course level is intermediate to advanced. It may be possible to design the internet course for the beginning students, but as far as this particular course at Sogang University is concerned, the students are expected to participate in an international exchange of opinion as regards a variety of issues, social, political, cultural, academic, and so on, so it is assumed that the students are expected to have language ability beyond the beginning level, at least.

(15)	<u>Level:</u>	intermediate to advanced English
------	---------------	----------------------------------

3.2. Objectives

The main objective is to enable students to develop English through practical use, using the Internet as the vehicle or tool.

Students participate in writing exchanges in which they express their opinions on reading materials they are assigned to read or they find, searching through the Internet. Students are also expected to present their ideas in class and in tutorial sessions as a communicative environment. For this activity, students will have to learn to express themselves clearly and to listen to others attentively. Thus, this course is designed to help students to develop not just writing but also reading, speaking, and listening. The main goals of this course are outlined in handout #(16)-(17).

-
- (16) Objectives: To enable students to develop English through practical use.
- (17) Language Skills: all four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)
Note: The electronic environment covers a broad range of English language style including technical, informal, and formal.
-

3.3. Assessment and Class Activities

Students are evaluated, based on individual computer writing practice, group workshop, projects, quizzes, and class participation and attendance. Class is also expected to participate in various activities, using various topics of interest, as given in (18)-(19).

-
- (18) Assessment: Based on individual computer writing practice, group workshop, projects, quizzes, and class participation and attendance

Class Participation:

- a. small group workshop
- b. international writing exchange:
students write essays, comment on other students' drafts, participate in real-time computer conferences, and prepare World Wide Web Pages.
- c. student research presentations

(19) Writing Exchange Topics: (examples)

abortion, advertising on television, tourism, my philosophy of life, censorship of television, non-verbal communication (taboos in my culture), history/current events, the effects of technology, poetry, music, marriage and family, etc.

3.4. Principles of Language Learning

This Internet course is founded on two principles of language learning, as defined in Professor William Burns' syllabus which was distributed to the Internet course students in 1996. One is that the language arts and systems are "best learned as a whole, not in isolated fashion," And another principle is that language is "most easily acquired through meaningful, purposeful, and significant interaction." This is reminiscent of Rivers' concept of "interaction," as given in handout #(20).

(20) Interaction (Rivers 1987: 4-5):

Interaction helps students to increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material and the output of their classmates in group discussions, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. In this view, through interaction students even at an elementary level learn to "exploit the elasticity of language."

In addition, recently Brown (1994) emphasized the importance of the interactive teaching method, as outlined in (21).

-
- (21) Interactive Teaching Method (Brown 1994: 25):
- a. Language acquisition is most effectively and easily achieved through meaningful, purposeful and automatic modes of interaction.
 - b. Students can develop a sense of self-reward as they appreciate their own competence to use language.
 - c. Through a complex and long process of interactive speech and writing, students access a number of errors, which will ultimately contribute to their process of development.
 - d. Language and culture are "intricately intertwined."
-

3.5. Course Evaluation

The Internet course instructors all said that previous students' evaluation of the course was largely positive. Unfortunately, today I have no statistical figure available about the evaluation of this particular course, but let me show you one student's comments on his or her experiences about the course. The student's comments are given in handout #(23) part of which I corrected due to some grammatical errors. These two students worked on a research project as a team, and submitted comments in one paper version as a team.

-
- (22) Evaluation
- (23) "[We] could learn lots of things from [our research through the internet and that our knowledge is based on [a] small part of

the facts and truth... We could learn about the same-sex marriage from ... [which] is the special list for studying the women's problem. The discussion in the list was so serious that we could approach...the topic more easily. ...the list gave us the chance to find other (information) from web site. Participating (in) the list was a precious experience that we've never had before. ...We were surprised when we saw the gay couple's Homepage in the web site. The gay couple were so proud of themselves and happy because...they love each other and live together. But it is a natural human mind. Love can gather people together." (by a team of two students, Korea, 1996)

These students' remarks indicate to us that the reading materials available through the internet provided them with a great deal of knowledge and information, which motivated the students to think further in the process of forming their opinion about the gay relationship issue.

Let us have a look at another evaluation by an Egyptian student taking an Internet course. The author says that this is a typical evaluation that is positive and is found across students.

"I am very glad that I am working on this e-mail project. Through this project, I have learned a lot of things. First, I have learned how to communicate with other persons who are in other countries, how to send messages and how to comment on the articles of other's. Second, it was very useful to read articles from different cultures and communities that differs from my own culture and to receive encouraging comments on my articles. Reading this variety of articles has attracted my attention to subjects that I have never known anything about before. Finally, working on my articles and searching for data for these articles was very useful to me

and has encouraged me to read a lot about these subjects that I am writing on. In conclusion, it was a very good experience, and I enjoyed it very much. There is only one thing that I want to suggest and that is to advertise about this project in order that everybody would know about it and be able to use it" (Warschauer 1995: 209-210).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to argue that the students will learn effectively to make themselves clear by means of illustration, commentary, elaboration, and explanation through courses like "English via the Internet" which is designed in the context of the interactive teaching method as noted in Rivers, Brown, and Burns as I mentioned earlier. It is expected that the students enrich themselves by being exposed to a variety of reading materials and other people's ideas through the internet search and the interaction with others in the international setting. This interactive participation will provide the students with the opportunity to open their eyes widely to various perspectives from which to analyze the issues under discussion and to organize and present their opinions.

References

- Brown, H. Douglas. 1994. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Rivers, Wilga M. (ed.). 1987. *Interactive Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Warschauer, Mark. (ed.). 1995. *Virtual Connections: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center*. University of Hawaii at Manoa.