



How To Learn English

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KOREAN, unlike English, is not an international language. As every student knows, chances of finding a desirable job without a moderate command of Functional English are vanishingly slim. The nation as a whole knows it as well; that is why English is a required subject for all middle and high school students. This is the crux of the problem: English is taught as a subject with the objective of learning the correct answer to questions about the language, in order to score well on university entrance examinations (or later, on the Test of English as a Foreign Language; in order to enter a foreign graduate school). Every high school graduate has studied English for six years, and every college graduate for eight or more years. The feeble result of all this education is that many can answer question about English, indeed know more about the history and structure of English than most native speakers do, but few can communicate to any extent at all in English.

In high school, moreover, the actual task at hand is learning the answers to the questions most likely to be asked on the all-important university entrance exams (which as

in Japan, do not include tests of speaking or listening ability). English therefore is taught in just the way every subject is taught and for precisely the same reasons.

It might be worthwhile to re-examine some basic assumptions. Granted that English is internationally used and Korea needs people who can speak and understand it. But might it not be better to train half as many who can use it twice as well, in lieu of the present policy of "teaching" all and educating almost none? Halving class enrollments and doubling contact hours might yield results. Unless more teachers were hired, which probably won't happen, English would have to be treated as an elective, as German, Spanish, French, Chinese, and Japanese are. Students who hope to enter universities will have extra incentives to study English since, quite apart from the problem of passing the foreign language section of the exam itself, a great deal of their assigned reading material (in any subject) will be in English.

Making English a required subject does not guarantee that anyone will learn anything. Forced exposure does not invariably lead to learning. On the

contrary, it further alienates uninterested students while depriving the others of their teacher's attentions.

Probably the most effective large-scale language teaching programmes yet devised were those operated by the U.S. navy and army during World War II (initially designed to teach Japanese). Most features of those programme cannot be adopted in Korean public middle and high schools, but perhaps to some degree, some of them can. Admission cannot reasonably be restricted to those students with proven aptitude, since the most reliable predictor of success in learning a foreign language is prior success in learning a different foreign language.

Those who fail to keep pace during the course cannot be sent into combat infantry units. Two highly qualified instructors, one of them a well educated native speaker of the target language, the other a trained linguist whose native language is the same as the students cannot be provided for each class. Students cannot be expected to devote 6 hours a day, five days a week to language study. Class sizes cannot be limited to 6-10 students, as they are at the U.S. government funded Defense Language Insti-

tute and Foreign Service Institute. Where some improvement might be possible is in the area of motivation.

As Prof. Kim Nam-soon has said, motivation is minimal at best, and attitudes poor, in Korean middle and high school students; under such conditions learning will be severely impeded. Moreover, the evidence indicates that the majority of students begin their encounter with English highly motivated; the condition does not persist. What is needed is less to motivate students than to avoid alienating demoralizing, and boring them.

Generally, what motivates anyone to learn anything is either (1) simple curiosity about how things are; or (2) the conviction that what one learns will be useful or otherwise valuable.

We are not advocating resurrection of elite education. We are simply suggesting that scarce educational resources could be better applied. One way to do that is to make English an elective and to teach it as taekwondo is taught, as a skill, rather than an academic subject, instituting structural and procedural changes that might allow that to be done. Recognizing this is the easy part; the problems will be in the implementation.— Newsreview