“Do South Korean Adult Learners like Native English Speaking Teachers more than Korean Teachers of English?”

Song-Ae Han
Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia

Abstract

Suppose you were an English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. Who would you prefer to learn from, a native English speaking teacher (NEST) or, a Korean teacher of English (KTE)? Some factors may influence your decision on this matter such as learning experience, level of English proficiency, motivation, interest, personality, occupation, age, gender, and so on. NESTs may use English more accurately and appropriately than KTEs. They may use the language more fluently and confidently. However, does native proficiency in English mean better English teaching? In EFL contexts, although non-native teachers may not have native English proficiency, they have intercultural knowledge bridging between their learners’ culture and English language culture which NESTs do not usually have. Using a language fluently and confidently is different from teaching the language effectively and in ways appropriate to the learners’ culture. This paper focuses on South Korean adult learners’ viewpoints of NESTs teaching English at language centres and universities in South Korea. The learners indicate NESTs’ lack of understanding of Korean culture. They wish to learn English from NESTs who are well qualified and culturally sensitive. However, on the basis of the learners’ experience, they expect that NESTs will be neither.

1. Introduction

“The director of one of Seoul’s top language schools told me he might hire based on a video-taped sample lesson so as to check the candidate’s appearance, accent and manner. In exchange for promising anonymity, he confided that in teaching, “education is not the key. Presentation is everything….Half the time the teacher will be ‘babysitting’ so, as long as you have a nice personality, you can make things work for you.” (Wharton, 1992: 71) ….Not the least bit surprisingly, Korean students are very similar to the Japanese so Korean employers are looking for the same qualities as their Japanese counterparts. This means someone who is lively, personable, more-or-less attractive and maybe, just maybe, knows something about teaching English.” (p73)

This author is giving tips to native English speakers (especially Americans) who plan to come to South Korea to teach English. The above statement implies his view of teaching and role of an EFL teacher in South Korea. Are “babysitting, nice personality and good-looking appearance” all the South Korean English learners expect from native English-speaking teachers (NESTs)? South Korean learners’ perceptions on this issue might be different. This paper explores South Korean adult learners’ viewpoints of NESTs teaching English at language centres and universities in South Korea.

2. Impact of Confucianism on roles between a teacher and students

Korea, Japan, and China have been under the strong influence of their philosophical foundations, that is, Confucianism and Buddhism. It is the reason for many similarities among these three countries. In particular, Confucian principles have played a dominant role as a foundation of educational philosophy and practice in Korean society and
contributed to the formation of fixed ideas of social rules, patterns of behaviour and thought, and human relationships.

Confucianism is a philosophy of humanity. It emphasises proper human relationships and maintenance of social order. The five basic hierarchical human relationships in the teaching of Confucianism are justice and loyalty between king and subject, love and filiality between father and son, initiative and obedience between husband and wife, love and reverence between elders and younger, and mutual faith between friends (Robinson, 2003; Yum, 1987a). Each position has moral responsibilities to be taken on the basis of reciprocal fulfilment.

Confucian philosophy believes in a fundamental distinction between right and wrong which is not doubted and can be distinguished by the human mind. The function of education is to enforce making the distinction between right and wrong. Teachers’ role is to pass correct knowledge into their students and the students should be taught not to question it (Ho, Peng, et al.:2001a). Teachers are expected to be respected as figures of authority and unquestioned about their knowledge (Ellis, 1994; Ho, 2001). They are considered as master-educators of superior self-cultivation (Ho, Peng, et al., 2001a: 42). They are supposed to be stern in front of their students and hardly give praise to the student who produces good efforts or did excellent performance, especially in the class. On the other hand, students are expected to be obedient, humble, respectful and hard-working. Decision making tends to be externally directed by the pressure from parents, peers and examination results rather than by the students’ inner direction (Ho, Peng, et al, 2001b). Due to this passive role of students, it is likely to be assumed that students from Confucian heritage cultures are silent, spoon-fed recipients rather than active, responsive seekers or generators of new knowledge.

3. Characteristics of Korean culture

This section provides some examples of characteristics of Korean culture. It gives a rough picture of what Korean culture is like and of what Korean students may expect from their teachers.

Importance of human relationship

As a humanity-based philosophy, Confucianism puts a great importance on the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Because they are influenced by Confucianism, once Koreans join a group, a company, or any organisational community, they are encouraged to attend such events or activities as company picnics, sports competitions, membership trainings, or ice-breaking parties. These activities are organised for group members to develop more informal relationships among the members, between supervisors and subordinates, and between seniors and juniors (Yum, 1987a). Private language schools follow the humanity orientation, with ice-breaking parties, mid-term parties and final parties for learners to have chances to develop relationships with their teacher and classmates.

In Korea, usage of proper language for certain occasions and for certain relationships is very important (Yum, 1987b). Through using different levels of language, human relationships can be defined as informal or formal and who is elder and who is younger. Accordingly, certain etiquette in communication that suits a certain situation is applied between communicators. Foreigners who do not know Korean culture may ask a question, “Why do Koreans typically ask about age to foreigners?” Koreans ask the question to decide which language to use, and which pattern of communication and behaviour to apply.
After obtaining personal information such as age, job, home town, etc., Koreans start conversation, by saying “Let’s lay aside our words” for the same age, or “Please lower your words. I am younger than you” for elders.

A Korean cultural concept which has profound effects on the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships is *uye-ri* (in Korean term). The exact or complete meaning of *uye-ri* cannot be captured in the English language but, according to Yum (1987b: 87-88), *uye-ri* has three major meanings: “justice, righteousness, a just case, duty, morality, probity and integrity; obligation, a debt of gratitude, loyalty and faithfulness; the proper relationships between people used in such context as *uye-ri* between lord and retainer or *uye-ri* between friends.” Through *uye-ri*, warm lasting human relationships can be created because *uye-ri* is far from give-and-take relationships. Europeans or English native speakers are likely to be considered cold by Koreans because their relationships seem contractual and calculating to Koreans. Through *uye-ri*, Koreans get closer and find social, emotional, financial and political supports. For example, smart classmates take care of their fellows, helping them do homework and understand lessons. In addition, when Korean adult learners have parties after lessons in the restaurants, bars, or karaoke, they usually pay for their teachers.

*Uye-ri* is created between people through certain periods of relationship and mutual shared experiences. Therefore, it may be difficult for Koreans to adjust themselves to the mood of, say, a cocktail party where Europeans or native English speakers appear to easily initiate conversations with strangers. Friends who have *uye-ri* do not criticise their fellow friends. Due to the culture, it is also hard to encourage Korean students to involve in constructive criticism and open discussion in the class.

**Importance of nonverbal communication**

Koreans place high value on nonverbal indirect mode of communicating. Confucianism teaches people to hide anger and sorrow, and not be too expressive of joy and happiness. Yum (1987a: 79) claims that “such expressions as the inscrutable oriental or secretive Asian are due to the lack of understanding that, under Confucian ethics, to reveal one’s emotion readily is to indulge in human passion which a serious deviation from proper conduct.”

Implicit communication patterns such as silence, verbal hesitance and ambiguity seem to be quite acceptable in Korea. Koreans like silence in expressing compliments or affection whereas rather than eloquent gestures and verbal praises. Kim points out (2003: 441) that “Easterners are often suspicious of the genuineness of excessive verbal praises or compliments because, to their view, truest feelings must be intuitively apparent and therefore do not need to be, and cannot be, articulated.” For Koreans like Japanese, language is a merely means of social and cultural communication. It is not the important and sole means of communication, through which they convey their thoughts and feelings as clearly as possible. Language is less used when a matter in the communication is more complicated and delicate to deal with. Language is no more important than atmosphere and attitude of communication.

To be a good communicator, one should be more sensitive in more subtle nonverbal interactions. For example, a good and sensitive communicator can offer help or provide something before being asked, which is considered as real and true help and service. The skill the communicator uses here is “*nun-chi*” in Korean. As a cultural concept, “*nun-chi*” can be translated as eye measuring, or “perceptiveness or sensitivity with eyes” (Yum, 1987a:80). “Nun-chi” means a skill or an ability to understand what is going on in a situation without being told, to read between lines and to hear between sounds (Yum, 1987a). A person who can not see under the surface is likely to be regarded as unsophisticated, as a person without “*nun-chi*.” Due to the culture of “*nun-chi*”, Koreans
tend to be very sensitive to others in interactions. “Nun-chi” can be one of the factors that cause invisible barrier or gap between Koreans and foreigners who place a high value on clear verbal expressions.

4. South Korean adult learner’s perceptions of native English-speaking teachers

As the English language as the lingua franca accelerates globalisation worldwide, the importance of English language acquisition has been emphasised in South Korea. Every year, increasing number of Koreans go to English-speaking countries such as USA, Canada, England, Australia and New Zealand. South Korea has been one of the leading countries which send students, especially to the USA (Choi:1999). Growing numbers of native English speakers also come to South Korea to teach English in language centres and universities. While some of them may have a meaningful time in South Korea, learning a different culture and language, and sometimes making good friendships with local people, others may not do so.

As a professional EFL teacher and experienced learner, I collected data for a study about South Korean adult learners’ perceptions of effective English learning and teaching environments, over 7 months in Seoul. Within a qualitative research paradigm, I used in particular, a background questionnaire, on hour (or more) tape-recorded interviews, personal notes and journals written by participants. This paper, as a part of the study, focuses on, in particular, the learners’ perceptions of NESTs in South Korea. 4 female and 3 male learners aged 20 to 45 were included in this paper. They were university students or company workers, attending English conversation classes in a language school in Seoul, or in the English improving programs arranged by their companies for the purpose of professional development of their staff. They were experienced learners in terms of having a more than 6 year-English learning experience with some having more than 10 years experience. They had certain beliefs or preferences in approaches to learning English and critical views on teaching and learning the language.

Lack of compassion
The learners with low English proficiency express their worries about learning in NESTs’ classes because they think that NESTs are not as concerned about their difficulties in learning English as KTEs are:

If my English was good, I might be active in class, but my English is not good, so I could not answer the NESTs’ questions, and become more passive and quieter. NESTs might not encourage me to be more active…In KTEs’ classes, when I do not know how to express things in English, I can use Korean and the teachers can give me advice. However, when I do not understand what is going on in a NEST class, I might get frustrated because they (NESTs) cannot speak Korean and do not know what my problem is. As a result, there might be a big gap between the teacher and me…If I go up to the first level of NESTs’ class, I think I may have to go through a hard time for about one or two months. …KTEs know under what circumstances and how we studied English in secondary schools and universities. And also they themselves went through the same learning experience as ours. They can understand us and why we do not speak English well, with a feeling of compassion. (Jun-Seuck, March 4, 2002)

First of all, their (NESTs’) culture is different. KTEs understand what I am going to say before I answer through nun-chi but foreign teachers tend to make me tense without understanding why I am quiet when asked to answer…NESTs are impolite. They think they are the best. I feel a bit annoyed. They tend to ignore our culture…They tend to think that even though Korean culture is regarded as great, Koreans are beneath them. I had such an impression when our class went out for drinking with our NEST. I felt a bit annoyed. (Seuck-Jong, March 22, 2002)
We have a school system of a main teacher in a class and we try to solve any problems related to students within the school. However, in America, schools call the police first. KTEs lead students equally without any students dropped but foreign teachers do not care. Students with good English can follow the foreign teachers but others are just left behind. (Yun-Kyu, February 25, 2002)

**Lack of understanding of Korean culture**

The learners think that the NESTs’ individualistic culture sometimes cannot be accepted in Korean culture. They also point out that NESTs’ lack of knowledge of Korean language and culture can be disadvantageous for the low level learners:

I think that NESTs have less deep relationships with their students than KTEs. I think NESTs would ignore things they are not interested in, regardless of their students’ interests. Their culture itself is like that. Their culture is a bit individualistic. Although their culture values not invading others, this value itself could be invasive in our culture. (Hyo-Şik, March 6, 2002)

I had a meal with a NEST once. After a meal in a restaurant, he paid only for himself and left. It was shocking. The teacher was old enough to be respected. (Yun-Kyu, February 25, 2002)

I think that learning English from NESTs (from an elementary level) is very dangerous. When I say something with my poor English, we never know whether NESTs understand 100 %. They do not speak Korean. It is good for them to speak in English in class but, before the class, I think that they should have basic knowledge of Korean culture. If I learned English in a language centre, I would learn from KTEs who studied enough about English teaching, then, if I want to keep learning, I would learn from NESTs. However, I would not learn from NESTs from the beginning. (Soon-Ee, February 25, 2002)

**Lack of qualification as an ESL teacher**

“It is possible to teach in Korea even without a university degree. Certainly, the old sheepskin helps land the plum jobs and will certainly make the government look more favourably on your work visa application, but there are hundreds of people working legally (often on a student visa while studying some aspect of the culture) and not-so-legally. Even with more foreigners going over to teach these days, I would still recommend even non-grads give it a try. Even if nothing pans out with any of Seoul’s 300-plus schools (hard to imagine), there’s always Pusan, Taegu, Inchon, Kwangju, Taejon, Kyonggu, Chollanamdo, Kyungsannbukdo and Kyungsanamdo-all cities of over one million with dozens of English schools each.” (Wharton, 1992: 71)

The quotation above shows how many NESTs in South Korea have no teaching qualification. The South Korean government has restricted regulations against NESTs without working visas over several years but NESTs still teach English with no teaching experience or qualification. Min (1998), who is a director of one of language schools in South Korea indicates that many of the present NESTs are recruited only because they are native speakers, regardless of their educational backgrounds. A learner interviewed expresses her experience:

I saw on TV that more than half the number of NESTs teaching in language centres in Korea have no qualification as teachers. I do not want to put them down but I doubt the effectiveness of learning from NESTs without qualification, compared with learning from NESTs with qualification. Being below standard is irrational. KTEs are appointed under certain standards but NESTs are employed just because they speak English well. My pride was hurt. (Soon-Ee, February 25, 2002)

This is reminiscent of a quotation by Singh, et al. (2002:185): in Bali, “people wander in off the beach in their shorts and thongs to ask for a job teaching English. Professional ELT
providers say, ‘What are your English language teaching qualifications? None? Why don’t you wander down to the hospital and see if you can get a job as a doctor?’.”

**Lack of responsibility for teaching**

In Korea, teaching is regarded as an honourable mission to carry out rather than simply as a job. In relation to teaching, the learners’ view is that some NESTs do not have the qualities of a teacher who can be respected, and do not make any effort for a good quality of teaching:

> Once I had studied in a conversation class for two months. The teacher did not make any effort in his teaching. Nothing special. Nothing particularly special. He asked a very plain question to each student without following up with other questions. There was a student with good English. He was a bit old. As he dominated the class, the rest of us were discouraged and moreover, it was the first day of the class. The teacher did not advise that the dominant student should move to an upper level. The class was kept with interaction only between the teacher and the student. We could only handle yes-no questions. (Hyo-Sik, March 6, 2002)

Some NESTs have a quality as a teacher but others do not make any effort for the class. In the university, I learned English from native English-speaking professors and priests. They were excellent. May be I am used to those teachers. NESTs (without the qualities of a teacher) just kill time with no preparation for the class. Their attitudes are light, insincere and they like Korean girls, especially in the case of male teachers. (Ji-Young, March 30, 2002)

I think that they (NESTs) easily earn money without effort. First of all, they seem not to have sincerity, most of them. They tend to lack the attitude and manner of a teacher. We Koreans respect teachers although they are just private tutors. However, foreign teachers seem not to understand such a culture and tend to think that teaching is just a job for a living. (Na-Yun, April 1, 2002)

**5. Implications for language learning and teaching**

The seven learners whose perceptions are presented here may not represent the entire population of English language learners in South Korea. Cultural misunderstanding is from the lack of acknowledging cultural differences. The differences tend to occur due to the differences in ways and degrees of doing, thinking, applying. For example, the Korean cultural concepts, “uye-ri” and “nun-chi” may exist in English native speaking-cultures. They only do not have the exact concepts to use in their cultures. Those concepts might be applied differently according to social contexts where people interact with each other, degree of relationships between people, or personality of individuals, and so on. There are a number of variables which decide the ways and degrees of applying the concepts. The main difference, though, is the degree of importance of the concepts in human relationships.

In Korea, Confucian teachings are deeply embedded in peoples’ beliefs and influence their behaviour and thoughts. The strong influence of Confucianism contributes to the formation of certain “Korean culture” such as “uye-ri” and “nun-chi”, which makes distinction from native English speaking-cultures.

Cultural differences in beliefs and values have a great impact on individual behaviour and perceptions. When people look across cultures, their perceptions tend to rely on assumptions formed from their own culture. Such assumptions are likely to be subjective, incorrect and misleading. The learners’ perceptions described here might be based on such assumptions although some views are from their own experiences.

Many foreigners without the Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs) may also assume that in the cultures, teaching is strict, unvarying, authoritarian, expository and exam-focused. Classrooms are fierce and overcrowded, and learners are passive, silent, uncritical and
receptive. However, this is not all about the educational context in CHCs. There is something behind the assumption.

Lack of knowledge about other cultures, and ignorance of cultural differences are the main reasons behind cultural misunderstanding, bias and prejudice such as “the unfair and prejudical stereotypes of the inscrutabl Asian or of the frank and rude Westerner” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001:2). One of the factors that cause South Korean learners’ distrust against native speakers may be the native speakers’ take-it-for-granted attitude, such as making no effort to learn their learners’ language and culture. This attitude may lead the learners to misbeliefs about native speakers’ arrogance, and their ethnocentric bias, ignorance and indifference about other cultures.

Language and culture cannot be separated. Particularly, when it comes to target language learning and teaching, this issue should be paid more attention. One of the important processes of language learning and teaching may be to be aware of the relationship between culture and language. The way a language is used and understood reflects cultural beliefs and values. Communication styles are constructed on the basis of culture-specific patterns of social interaction. To genuinely understand each other and fully deliver intellectual ideas, it is essential for each participant to be culturally sensitive and appropriate to their counterpart culture. How language learners hear, see, think, speak, learn, employ and respond is based on their culture. Inappropriateness and mistakes the learners make in use of a target language may result from their own cultural sense.

Each culture has its own pattern and style of communication, which means difference in the process of delivering and constructing knowledge and therefore, difference in the process of language learning and teaching. Communication patterns and styles also strongly influence language learners’ ways of engaging with tasks and demonstrating their knowledge. Without shared communication systems and shared knowledge of cultural values, it is very hard, particularly for the learners and a native language teacher to fully understand each other. Learners who do not know their target language culture go through frustration caused by inappropriateness and mistakes they make in the use of the language, and disabilities in fully conveying their intellectual knowledge. Teachers who do not know their learner’s culture and language would not also be able to fully facilitate and reinforce their learners’ learning. The more the learners understand their target language culture, the more they know how to use the language in appropriate ways. When language teachers understand differences between target language culture and their learners’ culture, and also speak the learners’ language, their teaching can be more efficient and effective.

The world is getting smaller and interconnected. Individuals from different cultures are interacting with one another more often. Globalisation promotes the dependence of people of different cultural backgrounds on one another. English is a major medium to accelerate this world trend of interconnection and interdependence. Every year many students from non-English speaking backgrounds go to English-speaking countries to study English. Universities in those countries are becoming aware of “world-wide corporatization of universities” (Biggs, 2001:305) in relation to globalisation and economic rationalism.

Now university systems are based more on market forces than scholarship. However, how well do schools and universities in English-speaking countries know the fact that their teaching methods are not universal? How much do their programs meet their overseas students’ expectations? Do they take the issues of cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural understanding seriously? Acknowledgement and understanding of cultural differences, and tolerance, respect and acceptance of different cultures may be the precondition to be a member of the global society.
References


