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Revised: Aug 17, 2022

Teacher Assistant - Advanced English: Presentation

Observations in an English (Multilingual) Business course.

My case study will be focused on the impact of cultural differences and the effects of trans-languaging pedagogies in learning the English Language. My field site is set in Seoul National University, South Korea. In my field site, I am a teacher assistant for an Advanced English Presentation class in the business division. Given that many students wanted to work globally, many students were set on improving their marketing skills, conference skills, and overall international skills. This class seemed to be a good fit for their goals as the class is centered around business presentations and business culture literacy.

This class is a preparation class or sorts for students who want to explore the field of international business. Korean students took up the majority of seatings for this class. Exchange students were the minority of the class. As articulated, this class is a preparation course. Most of the course was to prepare students for their presentation performance. To get ready for an upcoming project, students were set to come into class with a prepared resume and job description that they would later use in their projects. This was to assess where students were at when it came to performance and business language ability. Students were set to get in groups of three to four students, making the class have six groups in total.

Research Question

Before introducing my question, I would like to point out the cultural difference in education between Korea Europe, and America. Korean students are assessed by ranking in their class year and take entrance exams to get into the next school since elementary. They are divided by rank and are pushed to stand out from their peers from elementary school. America and Europe are different in this case. In European countries, the university is for the benefit of the students as they are typically free of cost and are less competitive to get into. In America, although students are not expected to stand out from an early age, students need to try their best starting from high school to compete with their peers. Although there is a wide variety of options for universities in America, American students also need a wide range of outside extracurriculars to stand out for college applications.

In South Korea, Seoul National University is the top university. Many students come into the school at top of their high school class. With an eagerness for perfection and knowledge, students are ambitious to learn English with fluency as knowledge in international languages is revered in South Korea—especially English. As my case study is set in this college as an Advanced English classroom, I can analyze the cultural differences in learning English and the effects of trans-languaging pedagogies.

1. How might cultural differences impact the learning of English within a business course?
2. How might trans-languaging practices/pedagogies support or inhibit their learning experience?

Theoretical Framework

James Paul Gee's work, "What is Literacy?", introduces the concept of discourses as socially defined. It is split into two processes, acquisition and learning. The acquisition is the process of subconsciously acquiring a function, while learning is the process of consciously obtaining knowledge by being taught. The mixture of these processes was apparent and essential to Korean students and their journey to becoming literate in English business presentations. As Gee stated, learning a discourse requires a combination of both. An example he deconstructs is learning to drive a car. At first, it requires instruction ("learning") but after it is *acquired*. Many of us understand what this means as most of us experienced the difference between driving a car for the first time versus the nth time. In terms of Korean students in a Business English course, students were set with both processes to help them use terms like "adapted" or "utilized" for their final presentations.

However, contrary to belief, formal instruction isn't always good practice for students. "...people who have acquired a second language in a natural setting don't thereby make good linguists, and some good linguists can't speak the languages they learned in a classroom" (Gee 21). Students need to practice outside of formal instruction to create literacy. Both powers need to be present. In terms of learning English in Korea, perhaps this is difficult as most Koreans converse amongst themselves in their native language, even during English instruction. International students do not have a choice but to speak English to their peers as it is the most common language they share. This leads to my question of whether or not trans-linguaging pedagogies support learning a new language.

With hypothetical situations for students to get a feeling of the business world, students can acquire the knowledge through hours of required practice. Classrooms that have an

acquisition environment allow learning to go beyond its limit of simply just *learning*. “Mind and Society” by Lev Vygotsky ties well into Gee’s analysis of learning and acquiring. The text overall explains the ideas and debates of how learning and development form with each other. In Thorndike’s perspective, “theoreticians in psychology and education believe that every particular response acquisition directly enhances overall ability in equal measure.” Learning the baseline of business culture would help them become literate as they adapt these learnings.

The last text I would like to introduce in this case study is “Superman and Me” by Sherman Alexie. Moments of certain clarity are important as students are set to read the course guidebook. In Alexie’s work, the author talks about teaching himself to read through patterns he found as a child. Korean students, although learning from instruction, teach themselves how to connect the dots of meaning through peers. With or without trans-languaging, students resort to relying on patterns.

Study Background and Methods

As a teaching assistant for the classroom, I was able to directly observe the students as they progressed through the course. I alternated with another teacher’s assistant to evaluate the students in their progress. I supervised the students and helped them with exam comprehension. Took part in presentation workshops by observing students and giving them input. I observed their presentations and provided feedback by reporting on presentation styles while keeping note of the use of scripts and slides. Lastly, I reported on the final presentations and created course reviews to report feedback to students. This all allowed me to get a closer perspective on the student's needs and goals.

During this time, I recorded field notes approximately 1 day after leaving the field site and used survey answers to enhance my understanding, aiming to stay away from personal opinions. This allowed me to report on my notes while getting student input on English courses.

Analysis

In regards to the cultural differences among Koreans, Europeans, and Americans, there was a big cultural difference in experience. Although the Korean students are rather advanced in English, they were not advanced in Business or other outside-of-school extracurricular activities. Most students in Korea were not trained to have jobs before college. Korean students, since elementary, are taught to solely focus on getting into the right middle school, high school, and college as they are judged by their rank, grades, and exam scores for each level of education. This type of culture is different for international (American and European) students as college is typically their main concern for acceptance when it comes to education. Usually, they do not need to worry about entrance exams unless it is for higher education.

International students, namely Americans, had more experience in the world field due to starting in high school with outside extracurricular activities. This means taking part in volunteer work, summer programs, and internships. A Russian student also stood out to me in this particular observation since he was a graduate student and already had a full-time job before coming into the class. Students from Europe or Hong Kong generally had a mix of the same experiences as Koreans and Americans. However, even with or without their business proficiency, some scenarios did not come fluently for them (Europeans or Hong Kong students) as some of the problems revolved around Korean cultures. Thus, literacy in Business seemed to

be the easiest for Americans and the hardest for Koreans, European students, and Hong Kong students being in the middle.

After three weeks of working with Korean students, I was able to distinguish the deeper cultural differences Korean students had with their international peers in terms of learning English. The in-class activities for international conference meetings and performance review preparation highlighted the differences among these demographic groups.

During these class sessions, students needed to first learn appropriate vocabulary, phrases, and cultural differences. Then they listened to an audio recording or video recording of a conference meeting and then read from the script. After, students set out to make their responses and solutions to possible scenarios that were given by the professor. This was all to prepare for an upcoming group project where students would negotiate five or more benefits they would like to negotiate after their performance review presentation.

Another cultural difference approach I noticed was how students approached preparing for a presentation. After writing notes for several students, international and Korean students had different things they needed to work on. Korean students needed more work in adapting their English skills while international students needed help practicing for presentations and executing their knowledge.

Korean students would memorize their script and sound rather robotic when presenting. Although everything came out perfectly, their movements and speech intonations were robotic. International students tended to rely on key points and sounded less robotic. However, although international students sounded more fluent, they tended to come less prepared due to their higher literacy. With this in mind, we gave students pointers on how to improve.

One thing that stood out to me during instruction was the students' ability to follow directions. This highlighted how trans-languaging pedagogies supported English language education. At times, some Korean students would falter as they were given class instruction. They would either not understand the next activity or they would miss out on homework.

At one point students missed a fatal in-class activity that was 10 percent of their grade. At first, we suspected that they simply came unprepared. However, after conducting a survey, we realized they did not understand the instruction. This was particularly eventful for the in-class activity interview role-play.

When the day of the in-class activity for the interview role-play came, the professor had to ask "Can you guys raise your hands if you were not prepared for this assignment?" Many students raised their hands bringing light to their confusion. One of the students even mentioned, "There are no clear dates on the syllabus." However, to a native speaker, there was a clear timeline of what would happen in each class, but the students were still confused. At first, we assumed that students needed a more clear understanding of what was expected from the next class, but then we realized there was a slight language barrier after course reviews.

Some students were already knowledgeable about what they were supposed to do and kept to themselves, while other students look confused and reached out to their peers for help. This is what could be considered a trans-languaging pedagogy as students were able to exchange information in Korean without avoiding confusion.

However, the question lies if this trans-languaging process inhibits or supports their education. One could argue that being able to translate the directions or converse in Korean with their peers supports their ability to keep up with the class. Yet, another could argue that trans-

linguaging inhibits their ability to adapt to the language if they keep opting out and using Korean instead. In other words, they are using a crutch without ever learning how to walk without it.

Results

The key thing that I observed in my field site is that Korean students seemed to rely on a script for their presentations and they could not fully understand the instruction one-hundred percent of the time. Although this is true, there seemed to be a benefit of learning as a group. Most students opted to glance at their peers to learn what to do next. Soon, the Korean students who were initially confused started to understand the actions behind the instructional words. Korean students, in an English classroom, teach themselves how to follow directions effectively. The students seemed to learn the pattern of their peers and started to pick up classroom signals as the class progressed. With a side glance at their friend or a low whisper of “What’s happening?” in Korean, students were able to pick up more detailed instructions towards the end of the semester.

In conclusion, perhaps trans-linguaging practices support their learning as they can also reach out to their peers for translation. In the context of my fieldwork, students needed trans-linguaging pedagogies at certain points to keep up with other students. Due to how fast the class moves, being able to get a quick translation from me or one of their peers helped. In contrast, the exchange students have no choice but to rely on themselves. This could also be considered a cultural difference and its effects on learning the English language.

Furthermore, cultural differences impact the learning of English within a business course due to how students approach learning. As mentioned, international students must communicate

in solely English, thus they tend to be ahead of their peers. Due to their fluency, they tend to come to class in a less prepared manner. Korean students, especially Seoul National University students, vary in preparation due to the language barrier. One key thing that they all do was overcompensate. Korean students want to present perfectly, thus, they use a script and sound like they are reciting their lines in their presentation.

Future Work

Although what I have observed so far is extensive, my fieldwork is also limited due to the type of demographic these students fall under. These students are only a small portion of what students are like in Korea, especially in an English classroom. Due to being part of Korea's top university, I must also take into consideration how that might affect the data. As many of the students come from competitive backgrounds, perhaps I am studying a unique group of students. This is unclear. Furthermore, these students are in advanced classes but do not require passing an intermediate-level English exam to take this course. How extensive their knowledge is or whether this class was appropriate for their level is unclear. Next, some students already had an advantage as they grew up with years of English language experience. Finally, this field site was only a semester's worth of data. Thus, I must question the legitimacy of my data as the group of students I studied was quite isolated. Each semester may be different as social atmospheres can change a classroom. These are some of the limitations that my field site had.

In the future, perhaps isolating these factors and researching a wider demographic would give more insight into the differences. If we want to use the same conditions as my field site, possibly extending the research to different semesters and colleges (globally) would give more

insight into how cultural differences might affect learning English within a business course and how trans-languaging pedagogies support or inhibit students' learning experience.

References

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Field Note 4

¹General Observations

[FN 1] The fieldwork I was set in was Seoul National University, South Korea. I am a teacher assistant for an Advanced English Presentation class in the business division. Many students were set on improving their marketing skills, conference skills, and overall international skills given that many students wanted to work globally. At the beginning of the fieldwork, students were set to give an overview of what they wanted to do and what they wanted to work on throughout the course. Many students said they wanted to work in marketing or raise their own business. This class seemed to be a good fit for their goals as one of the upcoming projects was to pitch a new, original project and sell it to the class.

[FN 4] During the final presentation, students were set out to create a presentation on their progress in their desired company—in other words, present for a performance review. Most students chose to present their performance reviews online. Students had a range of how detailed they would make their presentation. Some students would utilize the school library's conference room to create a more authentic performance review situation. Other students would simply use zoom to record and give their performance from home. As this was a group activity, all students needed to be present during the live presentation to give feedback and ask questions for the negotiation section.

¹Key Words:

Performance

Korean

America

Flow

Body

Script

Focused Observations

In my last week of working with the students, I ended up watching five recordings of the final presentation and one live presentation. Most students opted to send in a recording, while one group chose to perform live. The group that chose to perform live was more outspoken and was what the professor privately named ²“the strongest group” (OC). This may be due to how they consistently raise their hand during class, go above what is expected when performing, and often stay after class to discuss with the professor³ (OC). Due to most students opting to perform online, students had some leeway on when they were able to submit their videos.

Most students wore white shirts and black slacks⁴, much like the last class activity. Due to this project being more heavily graded, students were more serious when performing their pieces. During the recording sessions, most students rented out one of the Seoul National University library’s conference rooms and sat across from each other while one of them presented on the board. Much like a real business conference in America, students wore semi-casual clothes to strengthen the atmosphere.

The students who performed their piece through zoom for their recording session wore more comfortable attire. Only two groups submitted their project using zoom. The conference room was much better for grading⁵ as it allowed students to perform in front of a live audience while allowing graders to see their body language during their performance (OC). The main

² Professor input - idea of what makes a strong performer

³ Professor input - idea of what makes a strong performer

⁴ Attire - common attire in Korea when presenting

⁵ Attributes in performance

focus of this class is to strengthen each student's performance skills as presenting is a general role that they will have in the world of business.

The students who performed through zoom had their bodies closer to the camera, giving graders less content to grade their body language with. However, it was easier to see their facial expression. One disadvantage students had from doing this was the temptation to read their script during their performance.

Korean students tend to rely on a script, which was something the professor discouraged. However, working with a couple of SNU students one-on-one, I noticed that students heavily relied on a script to not mess up their lines when presenting a topic. As consequence, their intonations were rather stiff and didn't have the natural flow you would hear during a conversation (OC).

Although most students performed with perfectly memorized lines, their speech leading up to 5-minutes at most, their performance lacked the natural flow it could potentially have if they did not rely on scripted lines (OC). Four students performed with perfect ease, even with the scripted lines. Some students had some pauses as they tried to memorize their lines again. Three students looked at their notes and another student spoke in uneven high octaves as they tried to focus on their volume and script.

Korean students typically aim to perfectly match the rubric criteria, thus, their performance was very scripted. Due to Korean being their second language, perhaps this is not a surprise as speaking for 5-minutes straight on a topic could be difficult without advanced literacy.

This could explain why the American performers were more relaxed in their presentations⁶. Instead of sounding scripted, they spoke as if they were having a conversation with the audience⁷. Due to being more exposed to the English language, they had an advantage over their Korean peers (OC).

The Russian exchange student performed live as he was part of the “strongest group.” Although English is his second language, he performs without a script and tries to match the American students. Instead of recording his performance, the student performed live in front of the professor and me. He stuttered and made some unclear sentences, however, he kept going with his⁸ performance. “I should have practiced more,”⁹ he said. Although practicing more could have made his performance stronger, it stood out that he did not use a script and tried to converse with his audience.

Reflections

The main thing we were looking for was flow and fluency while performing. Many students were able to perform with clear accents and perfect body flow and spoke without stuttering for a full 5-minutes. However, instead of simply being perfect, they must have flowed as well. Part of this is from truly understanding your content and being able to summarize the concepts with ease. Practicing to perform in this way is similar to Gee’s concept in “What is

⁶ Attributes in performance

⁷ Attributes in performance

⁸ Professor input - idea of what makes a strong performer

⁹ Attributes in performance

Literacy?” By being able to successfully read the content that they wrote—this means in their resume, job description, and points they would like to make on their hypothetical success in the company—they would be able to create a strong¹⁰ performance.

Although this is true for a native English speaker, the professor and I also took into consideration that English is not the majority of students’ native language. Instead of grading harshly, we opted to give them pointers for the next class.

¹⁰ Attributes in performance