

## Article Title

A Case Study of a Korean Learner

## Author

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## Bio:

The author obtained her Masters degree in 2002 whilst living in Korea. She had been an educator in the U.S.A. for 11 years before coming to Asia. Currently she is working on her Ph.D. whilst living and teaching in Japan. In this article she considers a single learner of English. Much research analyses focuses on the class, the group or cross section of a learner group. This analyses highlights the application of teaching principles and theories to one learner, a young male Korean who first contacted his L2 whilst living in England before returning to Korea to continue his education.

### 1. Introduction of case study.

This is a case study centering on a student I have taught. In this case certain factors need elicitation before the study per se, for these factors directly impact upon this case subject's learning and learning environment and are Korean specific. In the expanse of EFL/TEFL literature, the greater majority of writings relate to the whole, not the self. This work attempts to isolate the principles for the 'whole' and apply them to the 'self.'

The subject is a young Korean born boy, hereinafter referred to as Jay. He is 12 years old (Korean age 12 years old, western age 10). It is worth noting that a Korean baby is considered one year old at birth, and on the next January of his birth he is considered 2. Thus a Korean baby born December of one year becomes 2 in the next month. Jay is in the 5th grade of a Korean government elementary school, and is in the third year of his Korean curriculum English education. At the Korean age of 7 (5) Jay and his family spent almost one year in England, whilst his father partook in doctoral studies at a British University. Prior to this he had no contact with English.

Now his level of spoken English is superior to/ more fluent than/ many Korean students of university level. Thus this case study will not only evaluate this student, but more also, given his age, what future learning and steps should be undertaken to prevent negative affective factors from interfering with his fluent bilingualism. It is important to note that my only contact with Jay has been for a one two hour weekly session which is attended by his older sister. This contact is not inside the school system, but on a private home visit basis. There is no formal testing done, apart from informal practice tests designed to introduce him to future curricula requirements.

This work will progress with an examination of the subject's personal history. I will briefly consider the influences of a Confucianist based society upon today's Korean youth learners, for it is clear that Confucianist principles grossly affect the teacher student relationship and learning in a second language, (Eur, 2001, Robertson, 2002). Finally, one issue that is

relevant in the assessment of Jay is the critical age hypothesis debate. This will be briefly assessed in light of recent research into neural plasticity, Stapp, (1999) and neurological MRI scans, (Hot, 2002). Having considered these factors, the study of Jay's past, present and future development can be examined.

## 2. Subject's personal history.

Jay is the youngest child of a family of four. His older sister is in 2nd grade Middle school, his mother is a math teacher in a Middle school, and father is a professor of engineering at a university. He expresses a desire to be a university science professor in the future like his father.

According to Humes-Bartlo (1989:196), students who make good progress in their native L1 tongue "...tend to do better in a foreign language learning at school." Research by Ganschow, Sparks and Javorsky (1998:251) report, "...good foreign language learners have been found to exhibit significantly stronger native oral and written language skills and foreign language aptitude."

Jay's school results show that he is doing very well in the Korean language, a typically difficult subject for students, so we would expect, based on his results and the aforementioned propositions, that Jay will continue to progress positively in his L2. Jay does not attend private schooling as is so prevalent in this country where a very high value is placed on education. According to W. Lee, (1996:27), "Asians students are not only diligent, but they also have high achievement motivation." Koo (2002:27) prefers to use

the term ".educational zealots...", whilst J. Lee (2002:58) refers to the "...educational enthusiasm of Korean people."

Jay lives within an EFL country, where once the student leaves the L2 classroom, the contact with the L2 ceases. There is little contact via television or any other forms of media, except cinema movies that Jay attends infrequently, and Internet, hence his outside school English learning contact is very limited. Thus none of the adjectival clauses above (Lee, W. 1996, et al) seem to apply to Jay yet.

### [3. Korean English Curriculum Education.](#)

The Korean family has been traditionally ruled by the Confucian philosophy that emphasizes patriarchal authority and hierarchical relationships. Koo (2002) suggests this relationship is diminishing, however, D. Kim (1999), suggests in fact a strengthening through realignment of the traditional rules of filial piety, a view supported by Oh, Y. (2002) who sees a contemporary "...Confucian bound Korean society...". Conversely, Sorensen (1994), argues the environment has nothing to do with academic achievement. Dash (2002) supports this argument. However, there is an explicit understanding that Jay, as the only son, will have to achieve an excellent education as it is he who must support his parents in their old age.

Jay is faced with the strong dictates of the main Korean school subjects, Korean, math, and science, alongside his compulsory L2 learning that employs various methodologies that have no clear focus or direction on L2 development, and a system that relegates English to

secondary importance compared to other school subjects. English language teaching throughout Korea does not utilize the principles of Inter Cultural Language teaching, (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1997).

The Korean education curriculum includes English as a compulsory subject from third grade elementary school to final grade high school, a total of 10 years English education. In its 7th curriculum, <sup>1</sup> its stated purpose is to employ the Communicative Language Teaching methodology. But owing to university entrance criteria, there is no need for the student to achieve any oral level output of English! Nevertheless, a small percentage of students, either through private school teaching or personal tutorage become proficient in oral English. Rote memory, despite the stated criteria of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rogers, 2000:64-83), still predominates. Exams are based on rote memory, and innovative English teaching owing to overcrowded classes of 40 plus and Korean teachers who prefer not to teach in the spoken English language, does not occur. Classroom English is a high priority of the Korean Ministry of Edcation, but according to Dash (2002), who has conducted extensive research into this, it still remains minimal. Jay is in the 3rd year of ten in his English language development, yet has clearly surpassed the level of the majority in their 10th year.

In this, his 5th year at school, he can expect over the course of the year to speak in English for less than 15 minutes in total if he is lucky; he will listen to cassettes, songs and chants for the majority of his lesson, with less than 5 minutes per lesson (2 hours per year) dedicated to English writing skills. At this level, Korean students learn 120 English words

per year, such as is found here, but only form simple oral sentences.

#### 4. Critical Age Hypothesis

The reason I briefly analyze this debate is because Jay's age falls within it, and certain aspects, though still largely arguable, do suggest areas that Jay will benefit substantially from. The critical period hypotheses propounded by Lenneberg (1967), suggests that primary language acquisition occurs during a critical period which ends at about the age of puberty and must occur before cerebral lateralization is complete, and the follow up implication being that second language acquisition will be relatively fast, successful and qualitatively similar to first language only if it occurs before the age of puberty.

In their research, Walsh and Diller (1981:18) found that different aspects of language are learnt at different ages. "Lower order processes such as pronunciation are dependant on early maturing and less macro neural circuits which make foreign accents difficult to overcome after childhood..." Thus this research gives support for the critical age thesis in so far as certain areas of language (pronunciation) come inside its parameters. Ellis (1996) makes a broad proposition by saying most L2 learners fail to achieve native speaker level ability. Later he appears to contradict himself by saying only "...child learners are capable of acquiring a native accent..." but qualifies this to what he terms informal settings. Thus we can persuasively argue that Jay falls within the parameters defined.

Singleton (1989) concludes (similarly to Krashen, 1981) that massive amounts of exposure are necessary for a child to achieve native like proficiency, yet Ellis (1996) concludes even

massive amounts of exposure still results in children failing to achieve a good level of proficiency.

McLaughlan (1992) argues that the younger the learner the more skilled he becomes in that language is a myth, and disputes the findings of Krashen, Long & Scarcella, (1992), yet concedes that, "Pronunciation is one aspect of language learning where the younger is better hypothesis may have validity". Hot, (2002:9) reports that recent SLA research has found through Magnetic Resonance Imaging that "...children between the ages of 7 and 10 did not use their brain quite the same way as adults performing the same tasks" confirming arguments of neuro-linguistics who argue for changing spatial proximities of speech learning centers in the brain, yet disagreeing with the similar MRI investigations by, K. Kim., Relkin, N., Lee, K, and Hirsch, J. (1997). Thus from an analysis of the debate, it seems that Jay's pronunciation of his L2 will benefit owing to his age and will probably become native like from attention to pronunciation and clear speaking issues, (Lane, L. 1997). Presently he exhibits a clear British accent, which is unusual in Korea where students exhibit a North American accent.

## 5. Testing:

Because of this particular teacher-student relationship and the purpose of teaching, no formal testing has been or will be done. Instead, testing, per se, consists of informal writing practice, and practice tests from various TOEIC practice test books. His remaining two years in Elementary school will require no oral testing at all, and any testing consists of simple single word questions excluding grammar. An example of his test would be a

picture of a classroom where the student has to label 5 items, (desk, chair, book, etc.)

## 6. Listening:

In so far as the elementary curriculum goes, there is no formal English listening test at any stage of his 4 years in elementary school. When he enters Middle school, he will undergo two important listening tests per year. Unlike other EFL/ESL countries (Greece, eg.) there is no listening skill lessons given to Korean government school students. They are just expected to listen and answer. For the time being the only listening he does in my sessions is direct listening to me. Issues of class size and distortion of sound, the norm in old Korea classrooms, are not relevant to my analysis, but are relevant if considering his classroom atmosphere.

## 7. Speaking.

Based on the criteria for the Korean English Speech Contest exams, I examined Jay with the same questions that were given to the finalists.

Qn: If you were the mayor of a big Korean city, what would you like to do to improve conditions for the citizens?

( 1.0 )

Jay: Well, there's many things I'd like to do but most important is building a very fast high-speed train that could travel to France;

(1.0)

because planes are quite boring and you can't see anything except sky.

Qn. But planes are much faster, maybe three times faster.



Jay. Yes but a train can have a triple deck and you can watch videos and have a bath and the train goes right to the station not to an airport.

His response time to questions is usually spontaneous. As opposed to his writing where he leaves out articles, this does not occur in speaking. Secondly, unlike the vast majority of students who undertook the test, Jay continued the sentence beyond the basic answer and qualified his answer with reasons.

### 8. Reading Comprehension.

This is an area not embarked upon. Time constraints of our weekly meetings do not allow it.

### 9. Writing

It must be remembered that Korean students do not receive any written instruction until first grade Middle school when they learn to write the alphabet. Jay, still two years before this time, exhibits advanced skill. His work relating to his past stay in England shows; misuse of articles, plural, verb tense and spelling errors.

A second work sample relating to the current World Cup shows correct verb usage, but the misuse of articles and plurals exists.

A third work relating to a picture in a supermarket showed a good knowledge of correct vocabulary, again with articles, and plurals the significant problem.

Thus future teaching can concentrate on correct use of articles (something that does not exist in the Korean language), plurals, (again this problem is widely noted specifically in

Korea) where students persistently make the plural singular and singular plural. This is a result of applying Korean grammar rules. Given that it will be two years before he encounters grammar and writing at school, he should have mastered the basics mentioned above.

#### 10. Body language.

It is difficult to assess Korean body language in cross-cultural communicating. Whilst little research seems to pertain to Korean body language, there is valuable information on Japanese body language, which has applications in Korea. Argyle (1975:52) notes the Japanese have an implied rule that causes negative emotions not to be displayed, and that their smile may in fact be "...used as a mask", (1975:52). Like Japan, a smile in Korea may be used to mask embarrassment or unwillingness to give a negative answer.

However, in respect to Jay, body language is not relevant, except to the extent we compare differences that he has seen in Britain and is done in Korea, such as the bow/ shaking hands, dinner table etiquette, etc. Body language instruction is absent from the Korean curriculum at all school levels, although in a survey carried out in 2001, (Robertson, 2001) of 1650 students and teachers, 97% agreed that they wanted more information on this topic.

#### 11. Pronunciation

Bearing in mind the caveats of Martohardjono, Epstein and Flynn, (1998, 613), that "... there is no monolithic notion of "L2 proficiency." Rather, we must distinguish proficiency with respect to semantics, morphology, syntax and so on." I have computer software

(Accent Coach, 1 Pronunciation Power, 2, The Rosetta Stone Language Library, 3) that assists in the developing of pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition, and use it occasionally to test Jay. Bird, (2002) argues for the importance that software such as these can play in a student's development.

Many Korean students find difficulty with the sounds of 'l' and 'r'. This is a well-noted phenomenon in both Korea and Japan, (Stapp, 1999). A second area of difficulty is with the Ø sound(s), often sounding like a 'd' sound. However, Jay does not display any difficulty in his pronunciation of these sounds. Jay does not, unlike Korean students who fail to place the tip of the tongue between the teeth, have this difficulty, though Ladefoged (1993) suggests whether the tongue is between the teeth or behind is merely a matter of being British or American and does not affect the sound.

Koreans notoriously fail to distinguish 'l' and 'r' sounds. They make the 'r' sound by placing the tongue in the 'l' positions, thus producing 'r'. Stapp (1999) of the provides further valuable insight with research of 28 monolingual Japanese students repeating lists containing the letters /r/ and /l/. Her research noted the sounds could be produced correctly by children after practice. Similarly, Yamada and Tohkura, (1997) note it is especially difficult for Japanese children to pronounce the letter 'r' after the age of 14. This is true of Korea. Jay does not show difficulty with these sounds, nevertheless, guidance and reinforcement cannot be but helpful given his age.

Software analysis of Jay's pronunciation of the sounds, graded by the software as

Excellent/Not quite (Accent Coach) received passes on all testings. Similarly, sound discrimination posed no problem to Jay.

## 12. Vocabulary acquisition and Reading:

Jay exhibits a remarkable ability to remember vocabulary, which seems to have been present from his year in England according to his British tutor.

Krashen (1986) et al, argue that vocabulary learning is best achieved by reading programs as opposed to direct vocabulary learning. Suggestions ranging from reading massive amounts (Krashen, 1986) to reading 50 pages an hour (Twaddell, 1973, cited in Seal, 1991) have been suggested to achieve the ends. Seal (1991) concludes his paper by saying, ".. that reading in a second language is an excellent way to increase a second language learner's vocabulary."

Further, different strategies from guessing games, to answering text questions, are suggested to reinforce items of vocabulary. However, the converse opinion is offered by Roseberry-McKibbin and Brice, (2000:5) who suggest that the "...idea of "the more English the better" is fallacious and can actually harm and slow down children's learning considerably." But it is submitted that none of the above views were specifically tailored for Korea as an EFL country, a country dominated by Confucianism and attendant study habits, (J. Lee 2002; W. Lee, 1996; Koo, 2002), wherein students thrive on massive input and long hours of study.

Long and Richards (1987, 305) say, "Although many EFL/ESL programs aim to teach a

productive vocabulary of some 2000 words, this is inadequate as a basis for reading anything but simplified ESL readers. For wider reading purposes, a vocabulary of some 7000 to 10000 words is needed." But clearly the authors failed to distinguish the substantial differences in EFL and ESL as well as showing little or no understanding of Asian education curriculum requirements. Fox (1987:308) suggests the list suits the students' productive vocabulary needs, but fails to meet the student's receptive vocabulary needs. "The student who knows only 2000 words and attempts to read un-simplified English...will not understand about 20% of the words and will find the text practically incomprehensible." (1987.) Thus, although we have no clear picture of an ideal vocabulary, but by going to the upper end of estimates gives us a guide as to what would be maximally ideal for Jay. It can be seen from the exhibits Jay shows a noticeable proficiency in vocabulary acquisition.

Thus if we look to Cho and Krashen (2001:170) who, following research on Korean teachers, report, "...that reading, especially free voluntary reading, helps improve vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar and writing...among second language acquirers" strongly suggests that Jay will benefit markedly in his vocabulary acquisition through greater reading than is currently being done. However, the caveat of J. Kim and Krashen (1997) implies that, although a positive experience is the trigger in further reading, that trigger may be difficult to initiate. Similarly, Fitzgerald (2000) suggests that whilst oral development follows reading development, this is confined to an EFL situation and not ESL. That clearly needs to be researched.

Jay and sister show a high level of 'delight' when we read novels I carefully chose. We read one short story per month. At most, when reading passages from our novels, I may guide him in the pronunciation of words he is coming across for the first time, however I note that he first considers new words, then silently mouths what he believes is the pronunciation, then first says that word slowly, followed by a more regular speed if he feels comfortable with it. At times I will guide when he is unfamiliar with the words. 'gh' sounds (laugh, daughter, etc) which are words that are notoriously hard to pronounce for Koreans, Jay finds no difficulty identifying and pronouncing it.

### 13. Grammar.

Korean language uses a S-O-V structure, with verbs falling at the end of the sentence. It is worth noting, at this point that Jay has not received any formal L2 grammar instruction. Elementary schools do not embark upon this except in superficial degrees, and dependant from teacher to teacher.

Yet an examination of his writings, attached hereto, shows his writing does not suffer from any serious errors. Koreans do not use articles in their language, hence the use of 'a, an, the' is quite a foreign concept, and Jay does show some faults in this region, but it is quite expected. This problem does not carry over into his oral production.

The fundamental question of course is, should a native English speaker who does not know the L1 grammar attempt to teach a student the rules of the L2 grammar? Nation, I. (1995) suggests a teacher should teach grammar, whilst Hirsh (1997:129) says the basic question is "What am I trying to teach my learners?" The answer here is preliminary guidance in

fundamental grammar principles, which will be vastly expanded upon later within his school curriculum.

#### 14. Konglish & Code Switching.

The term Konglish (Korean-English) is commonly used by Koreans to indicate the word they have spoken is what they believe to be a Korean invention using English word(s) to describe something, and that that word is not in common English usage. Konglish is part of their every day speech usage. Konglish has different forms, and applying the definition of Akmajian, Demers, Farmer & Harnish (1993), certain Konglish words are not code switching, but in fact 'borrowing' for "...the foreign words come to be used as regular vocabulary items", (1993:260), and are listed in the Korean dictionary.

Some Korean words may be a combination of the two languages, 'air-con, remote-con, side mirror'.

Does this become code switching? Kramersch (2001:125) suggests that to be defined code switching the speaker must be bi-lingual. This narrows the view of Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish, (1993). Defining 'bi-lingual' thus becomes crucial in determining if Jay is code switching or borrowing. Ellis (1996:696), suggests code switching is a branch of intra-speaker variation, and provides a definition that would exclude Konglish in all forms from code switching, for his code switching requires more than the juxtaposition of a single word and requires "...speaker changes from one variety of language to another variety or language in accordance with situational or purely personal factors." Romaine's view (2000:56), tends to support this latter view. Nishimura (1997) cited in McGloin,

(1998:546) suggesting two forms of code switching, namely 'real' and 'symbolic', still seems to exclude Konglish. Nevertheless, it is submitted based on observations that Jay can be deemed bi-lingual and frequently partakes of code switching. He uses loan words in his native Korean tongue, changes mid sentence from either L1 or L2 to the other, and uses Konglish in his L1 and L2 comfortably. In a three way conversations between his mother and myself, he switches from L2 to L1 to L2 with ease, either pre, mid, or post sentence.

1. Mother: {L2} Jay, how is your food?

2. Jay: {L2} It's delicious.

3. PR. How many points on a scale of 0-10 do you give it?

4. Jay. {L2} Mmm I'd give it 10. But I hate mushrooms.

{L1} (oh, don't forget .....

{L2} Delicious. {L1} (I've had enough.)

## 16. Future expectations and recommendations.

It cannot be expected that Jay will receive any useful educational impact from the Korean English education curriculum, given the grossly overcrowded classes and textbooks that do not inspire learning. The heavy demands of the middle school and high school curriculum, which Jay will encounter in two years time, will put his oral acquisition skills on the backburner whilst he falls prey to the rote memory demanded by the exam system. School exams do not test oral skills, and neither do the variety of TOEIC, TOEFL tests that students undertake to achieve a high point score that may influence their entry to college, university or employment.



Therefore it is suggested that at minimum, Jay needs regular weekly contact with advanced spoken English skills that cannot be found inside the school system. Secondly, and based on the opinions of Cho and Krashen, (2001:171), Jay must be encouraged to engage in "...free voluntary reading...". J. Kim and Krashen, (2000) also report the advantages of giving elementary students a positive reading experience which sets them on a permanent path of L2 reading and vocabulary acquisition. Perotta (1994) argues that second language learning must be taught with listening skills first, then speaking, then reading, then finally writing, and components are of equal value. This, however, does not take into account the requirements of the Korean curriculum, nor the counter arguments that all areas can be taught simultaneously.

The fear for Jay's future oral language development is that the negative factors associated with the curriculum will inhibit his progress. The options, given that his skill is worthy of developing, and his stated future aspirations, thus, are, his enrolment in a superior private language school with regular attendance or relocate to an English speaking country as is rapidly becoming popular with Korean students, (Soh, J.Y, 2002). Already Jay has expressed on numerous occasions that his school English lessons are 'boring', and given that he is currently learning a required vocabulary of 120 words per year with no written output and no rules of grammar, it is easy to see the gap between his level of proficiency and what he is learning. Thus whilst he is practicing TOEIC tests with me in his two hour lesson, and reading Sherlock Holmes, inter alia, and analyzing possible story scenarios, etc, he returns to his Korean classroom where he can communicate with no one, and the

negative affective factors thus surely arise.

## 17. Conclusion:

This analysis will not be complete until follow up research is carried out on the subject. I suggest that that time be February 2007 as at that time Jay will have completed three years of Middle School English, which if based on the present system, will be grammar oriented with minimal spoken L2 practice.

1. The Korean Education has introduced its 7th Curriculum which commenced in 2000 and will change in 2006 to the 8th curriculum. Each curriculum, attempts to install the latest teaching methodologies.

1. Accent Coach. English Pronunciation Trainer. Syracuse Language. Language Connect Institute.

<http://www.languageconnect.com>

2. Pronunciation Power. English Computerized Learning Inc. <http://www.englishlearning.com>

3. The Rosetta Stone Language Library. English Explorer. Fairfield Language Technologies.

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