



## **The Learning Curve and South Korea: The Best Education?**

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### **Abstract**

*The Learning Curve is a report published by Pearson and written by The Economist Intelligence Unit, which according to their website, “is part of a wide-ranging programme of quantitative and qualitative analysis” that “seeks to distil some of the major lessons on the links between education and skill development, retention and use” [1]. The first round of results in 2012 drew considerable international attention with Finland and South Korea occupying the two top spots respectively. By 2014 South Korea had taken the lead, Finland fell to 5th, and other East Asian countries ranked in between.*

*In light of these results, this study explored the South Korean case by surveying 127 domestic and 50 international students in South Korea. Students self-reported their perceptions concerning the quality of their second language education specifically, both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The results for both groups demonstrate that classrooms are predominately teacher-centered, lecture-oriented, highly competitive, and exam focused [2]. The results go on to indicate that these experiences often stifle motivation and increase performance anxiety [ibid]. An abundance of anecdotal evidence further indicates that this is the norm at essentially every level and subject in the Korean educational system.*

*One significance of findings in this study in association with The Learning Curve results is that educators and policymakers must recognize the narrowness of the latter when seeking to implement changes. The Pearson findings are only a sagittal slice of certain performance indicators without regard for larger sociocultural context and possible unintended negative consequences of success within a country. South Korean children may be “number 1” in achieving exam results demonstrating literacy in reading, mathematics and science. However, they also have lowest happiness among children in the developed world and the OECD [3] [4]. They also enjoy the highest rates of suicide [5]. Surely these are not desirable outcomes and yet they are directly linked to the countries educational system and norms. If The Learning Curve seeks to “open up what happens inside the ‘black box’ of education” and provide “lessons for developing countries” then it is paramount that stakeholders are also clearly informed of the possible risks.*

*In Pearson’s 2013 Annual Report addressing “responsible business”, the report states, “Our purpose as a company is to help people all over the world make progress in their lives through learning.” Yet their key issues are “raising literacy levels; improving learning outcomes and contributing to competitiveness” [7]. Surely educational professionals must recognize that the education of children need be much more than “outcomes” and “competition”. As John Dewey famously emphasized, it is important to realize “the measure of educative growth” is in “the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers” [8]. No doubt literacy and achievement are important things, but they are not the only things. The question is whether countries and classrooms want to trade away student creativity, civic responsibility, social awareness, and happiness, for the label “the best”.*

### **1. Introduction**

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), South Korea has ranked at the top among nations for household spending on education for at least a decade. Perhaps it is not surprising then that Pearson’s report entitled *The Learning Curve* also ranks South Korea as number one in the Global Index of Cognitive Skills (PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS scores in Reading, Maths and Science) and Educational Attainment (literacy and graduation rates). However, a growing body of research also indicates that South Korean students nonetheless enjoy only a mediocre levels of English fluency.

South Korean has long had a preoccupation with education with much emphasis placed on study, memorizing, and a test-taking tradition that persists today. Exams are so central to getting into better schools and jobs, a student’s entire life is often oriented toward preparing to pass exams [9], so much so that students have practically lost the ability to ask questions [10]. Not surprisingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that Korean elementary, middle, and high school students are among the lowest in happiness in the OECD [11] [12], for over a decade [13]. Furthermore, this result



is accompanied by persistently high levels of student suicide [14]. This research tries to illustrate the connection between the best test scores/education of South Korean students, to the low levels of fluency [15], in line with the severe stress, anxiety, and unhappiness centered in South Korean schools [16]. The hypothesis speculated that second language education environments in South Korea are not oriented toward fluency creation, but instead reinforce artifacts of hierarchical and teacher-centered methods that primarily teach test-taking strategies. The expected results were, in part, decreased student motivation and confidence with increased anxiety about learning English. Both results taken together mean “The best” are “the best test-takers”, while the unintended consequence at minimum include low fluency and unhappiness.

## 2. Background

The theoretical framework for this research relies in part on the work of Steven Krashen (1982-83) due to its simplicity and thirty years of verifiable support. This study mainly uses Krashen’s established theory: The Affective Filter Hypothesis. However, Krashen’s preceding theories are also noteworthy and relevant: 1) Acquisition versus Learning: ‘acquisition’ describes using language for real communication while ‘learning’ is simply knowing about a language. 2) Natural Order: There is a natural acquisition process with a predictable order. Basic grammar/vocabulary come before advanced grammar/vocabulary. Memorizing difficult forms when one cannot use the basics lowers fluency 3) Monitoring: Students and teachers try to correct errors to build accuracy. However, too much of this process lowers fluency. 4) Input: To learn a second language, information coming in has to be understandable: acquisition requires comprehension [17] [18]. The resulting theory concerns “affective filter”, which is essentially a barrier between a learner and a subject. Such a filter results from environmental conditions that elicit emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, and boredom, which interfere with the acquiring a second language. If 1-4 are disregarded, affective filter increases [19]. It is the position of this paper that the predominate education strategies in South Korean English and second language classrooms decrease fluency by acting counter to at least one, but usually all, of the aforementioned principles.

The literature suggests a learning environment should be safe, welcoming, free of anxiety, comfortable, and a place completely accepting of mistakes and of taking risks. Since motivation, self-confidence and anxiety are three factors most strongly associated with increasing affective filter [21] this study set to test the hypothesis to determine anxiety and motivation levels reported by South Korean students.

## 3. Methods

The purpose of this study was to identify certain activities of students and teachers in classrooms of Koreans learning English and international students learning Korean. Both groups learned from native Korean instructors. The survey conducted asked students about their experiences and perspective. 127 Korean students and 50 international students were surveyed.

Korean participants were asked how much time was spent in the classroom with the English teacher lecturing to students compared to the time practicing speaking. Acquisition and fluency are well understood to require practice. The questions then explored the student’s perceived self-confidence and motivation in relation their learning experience. Questions covered points such as “How much time did teachers lecture?”, “How much time could you practice speaking English in classroom”, and “Did your English learning experiences in Korea increase or decrease your motivation to become better at English?”. Students who reported as having lived abroad for more than one year were also evaluated separately and given other questions such as, “Did your abroad experience improve your motivation, confidence, and lower your anxiety about learning English?”

For international students, the purpose was primarily to determine if they had similar experiences as the Korean population. Further, since they are studying abroad, their answers helped to determine if they report similar answers as the Koreans who studied abroad. Researchers were available to answer and clarify the questions.

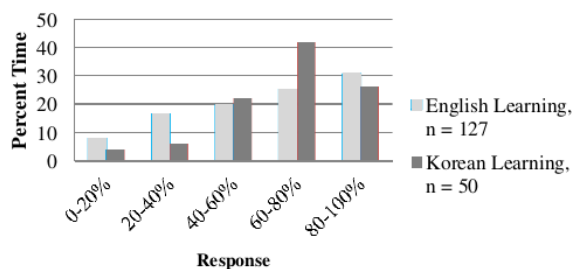
## Results

The first objective was to identify the amount of time teachers lectured and the second was to find out how much students practiced speaking English during classes. The following results (Figure 1) show what students report concerning the amount of time the teacher lectured.

Fig. 1.

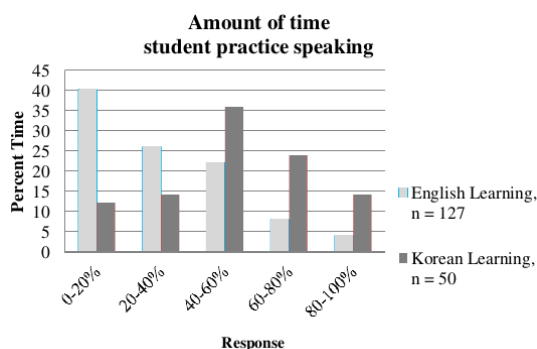


Lecturing in Classrooms



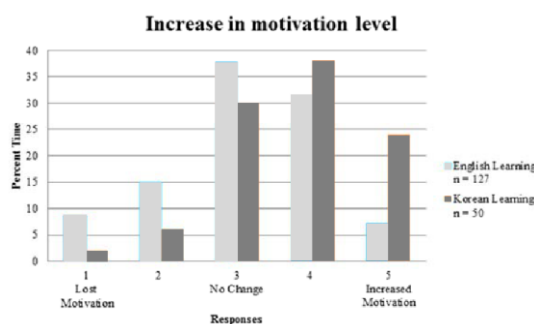
The second question concerned how much time was spent during class to practice speaking in the target language. As the previous figure demonstrates extensive lecturing, the figure below (Fig. 2) shows unsurprising amounts of practice speaking.

Fig. 2.



The third question asked all the groups about their motivation: 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Low scores indicate lost motivation due to their learning experiences. If they marked 3 it meant that their motivation was unchanged.

Fig. 3.



For the Korean students, the results indicated that although the majority lost motivation or were unchanged (which fits the hypothesis) a large minority had positive motivation changes following their experience. Granted, no students went so far as to say they had “very motivating” experiences, but the result was still unexpected. One possible explanation of this result from the literature is that these students were motivated by “language learning” or “educational zeal” and not language acquisition itself. They may have also had a positivity bias associated with good grades or a charismatic teacher. Motivation could have also come from what was *not* experienced in the cases of unfulfilled students. Further research is needed to understand the motivation results, especially concerning hindsight.

#### 4. Discussion/Conclusion

The original hypothesis stated, “The second language education environment prior to university in South Korea is not oriented toward fluency creation, but instead reinforces hierarchical and teacher-centered methods to teach a second language.” Ultimately, this results in lowering student motivation



and confidence while increasing anxiety about learning English: an increase in "affective filter". This study provided confirmation of the hypothesis, but also revealed areas that need further exploration and study. According to the data, students self-report that the second language education environment prior to university in South Korea is primarily teacher's giving lectures to the students rather than students practicing speaking in the classroom. This sort of second language education does not result in an increase in student acquisition (fluency), but instead is focused on "learning" through passive activities such as reading and listening. In essence, many Korean students learn aspects of English like grammar and syntax, but they do not acquire a complete and functional use of the language itself. This proves the aspect of the hypothesis that states 1) South Korea is not oriented toward fluency creation and 2) it reinforces hierarchical and teacher-centered methods to teach a second language. The results were also that the Korean English learning environment is a demotivating to unmotivating experience. This means that affective filter is systematically heightened, which causes a further reduction in fluency. However, one aspect that went against expectations was an recorded increase in motivation for some, which could imply a decrease in affective filter, or something else, but this study does not provide enough information to explain how or why. Perhaps they enjoy English as a discipline, rather than as a vehicle for communication. Or, their motivation was a result of really wanting to learn, but not being offered the environment to use the language. It is also possible that the teachers of these students were unique and implemented teaching strategies outside the country norm. Further data collection needs to be done to understand this population and their responses.

The results indicate that the traditional educational norms and student-teacher roles that have survived since antiquity in Korean society appear to reinforce a high affective filter in modern second language learning in South Korea. Another factor that acts to increase affective filter is the cultural rigidity in South Korea that looks unkindly upon mistakes and failure. This results in tremendous performance anxiety as well as a preoccupation with needing to save face and reduce shame, further leading to increases in affective filter and lowered fluency in the second language.

According to Krashen (1983), optimal second language acquisition conditions occur when comprehensible input is present and affective filter is low. Such conditions occur with a supportive classroom environment free of barriers or constraints to language acquisition. High motivation and low affective filters are established when teachers provide meaningful encouragement, allow and expect mistakes, and create a low anxiety atmosphere where speaking and risk-taking are the norm.

Teachers, scholars, and policymakers who pay close attention to reports such as the *Learning Curve* should closely consider the limitations of such studies. South Korean children are indeed well educated and excellent at taking tests. Yet the ability to apply one's knowledge is surely also of value, although not as easy to quantify as a test score. Furthermore, no evidence indicates correct test answers make creative, competent and psychologically healthy citizens. If the goal is to determine what is "best" in education as implied, then research must look at the whole child and student, not just the test-taker.



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