
Reflections of an American English Teacher in Korea

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Almost a year has passed since I arrived in Korea to take up my assignment with the Fulbright ETA (English Teaching Assistantship) program. Like most of the forty-two young American university graduates who arrived at Kimpo that day, I could not speak a word of Korean and had no prior professional teaching experience. After a six-week ‘crash course’ to deal with these deficiencies, the members of the ETA Class of 2000 left Seoul to take up the challenge of teaching English in schools across the Korean peninsula. I was assigned to a girls high school in Mokpo, a city of approximately 240 thousand located in the southwestern corner of the Korean peninsula.

Thus far, the experience has been rich and rewarding, but at times also troubling. Since I began teaching in August last year, many of my experiences at my high school have impressed me greatly, while others have left me with some concern about both the immediate and long-term impact of the educational system on Korean students.

This article presents several observations and concerns from the professional side of my ten months in Korea. It begins with several caveats: first, having worked in Korea for such a short time, I can claim only “novice observer status” with respect to Korea and its educational system, and I am certainly a long way from mastering the art of teaching. Second, these are reflections of a person whose elementary and middle school experience was typically American – public and suburban. My secondary schooling was in private schools in Australia. My university education was in the U.S. Thus, the background against which I evaluate my Korean experiences is not completely coherent. I

will begin with my positive reactions to the Korean system and conclude with my concerns.

American educators who have the opportunity for a short visit to a Korean provincial school would probably come away with a number of false impressions. For the most part the physical facilities are basic. Although the school is well equipped technologically, with large television monitors and computers with access to the Internet in every classroom, there is no gymnasium, no auditorium and only a very small library. Visitors also might be surprised to find that the school has no central heating system. The classrooms become so cold in December and January that students have a six-week break during these months. What any short-term foreign visitor will not see, and what has impressed me the most in my time at Mokpo Girls High School, is the extraordinary dedication of the teachers and their concern for the welfare of their students. Even though class sizes are large, averaging forty students, no student is allowed to “slip through the cracks.”

One area where this is apparent is in the role of homeroom teachers. Korean homeroom teachers carry a much broader range of responsibilities than their counterparts in schools I attended in the U.S. and Australia, where their primary role is to take attendance in a brief fifteen-minute period at the beginning of the day. In Korea, being a homeroom teacher involves a great deal more than counting heads. They are expected to keep their students on good behavior, to assist in improving their grades in any subject, and to monitor any shifts in mood or behavior that could indicate problems in their personal lives. Not surprisingly, the hours required of

homeroom teachers are greater than those of teachers in other roles. To coach students during the after school “free study” time and to ensure students in their charge are working sufficiently hard to keep up with all of their subjects, it is not uncommon for homeroom teachers to finish their day’s work as late as ten o’clock at night.

While I was fortunate to have had many good teachers in the U.S. and Australia, I believe very few of my teachers would have accepted the hours worked by my Korean colleagues. In addition, I never sensed the level of commitment to the welfare of individual students that I have experienced among teachers here in Mokpo. I wonder if the gun violence experienced in American schools over the last few years, such as at Columbine, Colorado and more recently at Santee High School near San Diego, California, would have occurred if American teachers viewed their responsibilities to individual students as they seem to here in Korea?

The dedication of Korean teachers is also apparent in their willingness to accept the sacrifices to family life involved with transfers every two to four years among schools within their region. The practice of transferring teachers every few years was developed to promote consistency in the quality of education offered in rural and urban areas. Without such a system, the schools in larger cities would benefit from being able to select from a larger pool of qualified teachers, while the rural schools would suffer teacher shortages. The situation in South Cholla Province, which includes Mokpo, illustrates this problem. In addition to the cities of Mokpo, Naju, Yosu and Kwangju, the province includes numerous islands along the coast. There are small fishing communities on many of these islands with populations large enough to justify operating elementary and middle schools. But being so remote, it is not likely that these villages and small towns could attract qualified teachers.

Multi-year assignments to island schools are

particularly difficult for the teachers and their families. My homestay father is a physical education teacher who has had island placements for the past six years.¹ Every Saturday afternoon, he returns home to Mokpo by ferry. He then has twenty-four hours to catch up with his family before taking another ferry back to school on Sunday afternoon. During the week, he sleeps and eats all of his meals at school with other teachers who share his boarding situation.

While to the outsider it may seem that Korean educators are making great and noble sacrifices to ensure the well-being of the broader community, I am not sure they see it that way. A couple of weeks ago at a gathering of English teachers in Mokpo, I asked several teachers their views on the transfer system. I was quite surprised to learn that very few teachers seemed bothered by the need to change schools so often. One teacher from a nearby boys high school felt that the system was the only way to solve a potentially serious social problem. She told me:

All of Korea’s children, living in both urban and rural areas, need to be educated, but there are many more highly qualified teachers in the cities than the countryside. The only fair way to deal with this problem is for all teachers in the region to share the responsibility to educate the whole region, not only students who live in their own town or village.

Other teachers added that they enjoyed the opportunities that this system provided to meet people and work in fresh environments every few years. When I told them that I could return to my middle school outside of Boston and visit the same teachers that taught me when I was a student there, one teacher exclaimed, “How boring!”

The positive attitude and self-sacrifice my Korean colleagues display in addressing inequality of educational opportunity has impressed me a great

deal. In the United States, a different path has been taken in an attempt to solve the same problem. When faced with the inequality of educational opportunity between inner city and suburban public schools, the American solution puts the burden on the students, not the teachers. Students from underprivileged inner-city neighborhoods are bussed to suburban schools with better educational facilities. A friend in my middle school was (voluntarily) bussed from a poor Boston neighborhood to my town, a distance of 30 km each way. Some inner-city students who attend suburban schools begin their school day on a bus at 6 AM and do not return home until almost 6 PM.

In reflecting on the willingness of Koreans to be relocated, I have found myself wondering how American teachers would react to being transferred from school to school every few years?

While the commitment of my Korean colleagues to their students and to the educational system has impressed me greatly, some aspects of the Korean education system I find quite troubling. One concern is that students seem to be motivated to learn solely to do well on exams, particularly the exams that determine where they will attend university. Teachers as well seem to focus their efforts more on producing good exam results than on the overall “education” of students. In the Korean educational system there seems to be no pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. The mission of the Korean educational system seems to be to produce students who do well on university entrance exams.

Such a narrow focus on exam preparation is caused in large part by university entry procedures. Similar to the system in Australia, but unlike that in the U.S., the grade one earns on the exam determines which university you are able to attend. Failure to win admission to an elite Korean university (Seoul National, Yonsei and Korea, in particular) places a person at a distinct social disadvantage for, quite literally, the rest of their career.

Couple that with the influence of the Confucian hierarchy of professional prestige (many students are pressured by parents to be professors, lawyers and doctors) and the pressure for students to excel on the exam is, for most Americans, quite unimaginable.

The second concern relates to the first. The very narrow focus on producing good exam scores has resulted in a “cram style” learning in Korea. Students become very good at the hurried memorization of as many facts as possible before exams. Unfortunately, for most people, cramming is only conducive to retaining information in the short term. After a couple of weeks, sometimes even days, the collection of facts is gone, and the student is left no better “educated” than before the cramming process began.

Cramming seems to produce what my fellow ETAs call “robot” students. These are students who are able to absorb an impressive array of facts, but do not seem to be able to relate those facts to other areas of their lives. Robot students are able to ingest a great deal of information, but they do not seem to know how to digest it in a way that will nourish and sustain their development over the long term.²

At a recent gathering of English teachers in Mokpo, one teacher provided a perspective on the robot student phenomenon in the context of English education:

Koreans spend an enormous amount of time and money learning English, often attending private tutoring academies for up to ten years before university. But even after all those years of studying, most are still incapable of speaking a single sentence in English. When they encounter a foreigner who is a native English speaker, they have nothing to say. I think this is because students in Korea are taught to know a lot about the English language, without being taught English, itself.

In other words, students we encounter in Korea learn many facts about the English language, but are not equipped with the tools needed to put the language to use outside of the classroom.

I have encountered this situation on many occasions. As an English conversation teacher, I encourage students to use English in everyday situations, such as greeting friends and ordering food. Although my students have shown great improvement over the course of the year, even the simplest conversation points often seem over their heads. The majority of my students can write impressive compositions in English, but many still have trouble remembering the appropriate English phrase to use to ask to be excused to go to the restroom. “Teacher, nature calls!” they yell with hands desperately waving in the air. Although sensitive to their predicament (and with appreciation for the fact that it is hard to learn anything when “nature is calling”), I nonetheless refuse to give up the pedagogical leverage I have at that moment.

“If you can say, ‘Teacher, may I please go to the bathroom?’ you may go,” I tell them. At this point, they hurriedly mumble the phrase and rush to the door. Despite the repetition of this scenario many times, I still hear “Nature calls!” in many of my classes. I believe at least part of the problem stems from the emphasis the Korean education system places on students programming themselves for exams, rather than for “real world” situations. Another possible cause may be that English, with all the exceptions to the rule and multiple spellings of the same sounds, is probably very difficult to cram, recall and recite from memory.

The extreme focus on exams influences more than the style of learning, it restricts what Korean students learn and what they experience outside school as well. Korean students allocate their time carefully. Except for the few hours a day needed for eating and sleeping, most Korean high school students spend all their time doing academic study.

Unfortunately, most of my students feel compelled to limit the range of interests in their lives in order to devote as much time as possible to exam preparation. Rather than leaving school in the afternoon to pursue sports, music or other non-academic interests, they remain at school until five in the evening to attend supplementary classes in a variety of subjects. After that, most take off one hour to eat dinner and then return to school for a “free study” period until nine or ten o’clock.

Those who do not return to school for the evening “free study” often attend private tutoring academies, or *hagwon*, which are little more than cram schools for university-entrance exams. *Hagwon* classes sometimes finish as late as 2 AM and begin as early as 5 AM. In the most extreme cases, students do not return to their homes at all. Most *hagwon* provide sleeping bags to those who attend the latest and earliest classes so that they can get some rest between sessions. Students sleep at the *hagwon* to eliminate commuting time and leave more hours for study.

In such an environment teachers and students tend to view time spent on non-academic activities as being “wasted.” One student, Ji-hye, told me that even if the government were to reduce the hours that students are required to spend at school, a move Japan’s Ministry of Education made recently, most students would choose to spend any extra “free time” in the afternoon and evenings attending *hagwon* classes. “Don’t you think many students would prefer to play sports or learn a musical instrument instead?” I asked Ji-hye. She looked at me with a furrowed brow and replied, “Playing sports and musical instruments is something Koreans can enjoy when we’re young, but once we reach high school, we must study all the time. Most students fear that if they do not attend a *hagwon* and study until late at night, they will fall behind the others who are studying for longer hours.”³

Even though I am sympathetic to the pressures

that Korean students face, I am concerned about what they are not learning by keeping their noses in their books for the entirety of their high school experience. My own experiences dealing with heavy workloads in high school taught me that occasionally taking time off from the task at hand actually increases productivity in the long run. I also learned many lessons on the soccer field or on the river with my crew team that have been just as valuable as anything learned from a textbook. From sports I learned teamwork and leadership skills. Sports also boosted my confidence by teaching me how to challenge myself, how to push myself harder than I thought possible, how to deal with defeat gracefully, and how to recover from defeat to go on to win another day. My extracurricular activities also taught me how to appreciate beauty in art and music. I can't help but wonder whether the lives of my students are being diminished by their near fanatical response to the narrow focus of the Korean education system.⁴

In conclusion, it seems to me that Korean educators are doing many things right. The Korean education system provides a strong, stable foundation of support and guidance to the individual student. Korean students know someone outside their family cares about them and their success. The dedication of Korean teachers and their willingness (and that of their families) to sacrifice for the sake of equality of educational opportunity across Korea provides a sound example for students of how one fulfills civic responsibility.

My concerns regarding the narrow, exam-focused educational system, cram-style learning and lack of extracurricular opportunities for my students is that in the end the system may fail them – all of them. The system may fail even those who are not overwhelmed by the intense pressure to succeed on the exam and who go on to win one of the few places at elite universities. It may do so because it may not adequately prepare them to compete in the

world beyond my classroom or, for the most fortunate ones, the classrooms of Seoul National University.

It seems to me that the real challenge for educators everywhere in the world today lies in preparing the current generation of students to lead and manage the world of 2020 and beyond. It is impossible for anyone to predict today what that world will be like. The only certainty is that it will be vastly different from the one that existed when the textbooks my students cram from were written. If all my students only learn what classroom teachers and *hagwon* sessions cram into their heads, will they be able to succeed in the future? Will Korea be able to compete effectively in a rapidly globalizing world? How will they keep up with a rapidly changing base of critical knowledge?

Probably, the only thing Korean educators can teach students today that is certain not to lose value in the future is to teach their students how to educate (and then re-educate) themselves. This means learning not for the purpose of achieving short-term goals, but learning for the sake of expanding individual capabilities and horizons. It means instilling in students the awareness that their real education is never complete. If my students could dedicate only a fraction of the energy spent in preparation for the university exam on broadening their horizons and learning how to educate themselves throughout their lives, they would be much better equipped to pass the exams the future is bound to present.

NOTES

- 1 I have been living with a Korean family in Mokpo.
- 2 I must admit that the image of the "robot" student is something I brought with me to Korea. The stereotype held by most Westerners is that this type of educational system produces people who are masters of facts, but somehow lacking in "creativity." Because of my awareness of the lack

of emphasis on creative thinking in the Japanese education system, I assumed that my students in Korea would also have trouble with assignments that require original thought. I found this not to be the case. In the first "creative" writing project assigned to my class I handed out collages of cut-out pictures from magazines with unusual combinations of people and objects and asked the students to write their own stories to explain who the people were, what they were doing and why. The results were spectacular: the students had me in fits of laughter with tales of shoe-eating aliens, medieval murder plots and tantalizing love triangles. My limited experience suggests Korean students can be creative when provided an outlet and the opportunity to express it.

- 3 Koreans have also become disillusioned with this system. Increasing numbers of Korean families are choosing to emigrate to foreign countries, such as Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, in search of better educational opportunities for their children. A recent article in *The Korea Times* stated that, last year alone, 15,307 Koreans moved abroad, an increase of 20.9 percent from 1999. Bang Dong-hyun, a Korean man who hopes to emigrate to New Zealand with his family, was quoted as saying: "I made up my mind to leave the country because I can't let my kids suffer in the dreadful education system. The thing children learn in school is the law of the jungle. I shuddered when I realized that my kids have no other option but to beat their friends to survive the cutthroat competition." ("Emigrations for Better Life on Rise," Sohn Suk-joo, *The Korea Times*, March 30, 2001, p. 7).
- 4 Of course, American students are similarly guilty of "working the system" to get into a good university. The major difference is that the American system emphasizes the importance of success in extracurricular activities as well as academics. Straight A's in high school and perfect SAT scores may not produce admission to Harvard and Stanford. Students with less-than-perfect

scores but who have achieved something significant in non-academic spheres, such as music, sports or art may have a better chance. Because of this, many American students, eager to be admitted to top schools run themselves ragged in pursuit of the perfect combination of "well-roundedness." Instead of spending their time in a *hagwon*, the "free time" of American students is consumed by varsity sports, school club activities, student government, volunteer work and perhaps even Sunday school teaching on the weekends. Many students are involved in all of these activities not to expand their knowledge of themselves and their abilities in non-academic pursuits or contribute to their communities, but only to get into college.

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