

***To what extent could a redesign of Communicative
Language Teaching in secondary education assist
learners in a highly test-orientated context?***

Lee Colburn

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University of Brighton

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Simon Wilkinson

Introduction

The act of language production is considered among many teachers and L2 learners to be a fundamental part of second language acquisition. However, the precise benefits remain unclear (Izumi, 2002:542). Much has been argued that output develops fluency, but its use as a tool for increasing knowledge about language is even more debateable. Since language skill is different than language knowledge (Ellis, 2008:2), could output in general or perhaps ‘pushed output’ assist with this L2 skill that learners require. Swain’s concept (1985) of *pushing* learners from the “semantic processing” of input comprehension to the ‘syntactic processing’ of encoding meaning, was built around 5 major factors. (A) Forcing learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage, (B) Creating opportunities for testing and formation of meaning, (C) Automatising encoding, (D) Allowing learners a ‘personal voice’ (discourse), and (E) Generating ‘metatalk’ or deepening form-meaning (Swain, 1998:69, cited in: Toth, 2006). This was known as part of her output hypothesis; essentially learners producing output during communicative tasks results in the acquisition of an L2 language through restructuring and automatising (Toth, 2006:327). Learners are provided feedback upon their utterances and opportunities for learning are created through output modification (McDonough, 2005:79).

Communicative language tasks (CLT) are constructed around “meaningful L2 interaction in often simulated communicative situations” (Dornyei, 2009:34). In the context of Korea, CLT was adopted in the early 1990’s in an attempt to shift from traditional grammar instruction to communicative English curriculums (Kwon, 2000). In support of President Kim-Young Sam’s *seggyehwa* globalisation policy, English communication was placed highly on the Korean educational agenda. The government wanted citizens to improve their spoken English and be prepared for verbal communication with CLT seen as the answer (Li, 1998:681). They shared the widespread assumption that “learners communicative competence develops automatically through active participation in meaningful communicative tasks” (Dornyei, 2009:34). The flaw in this plan, seemed to be Korea’s obsession for testing with educational assessments being the gatekeepers of one’s success (Kwon, Et Al. 2017:60). English became not a choice but a language of necessity far removed from its intended functional use (Lee, 2011:126). This testing plays a critical role in placing

learners within the complex hierarchy of Korean society, “determining knowledge, affecting distribution of wealth, shaping language policies, and transforming teaching and learning” (Shohamy, 2013:226). Korean learners, teachers and foreign English teachers are under no illusions that the overwhelming washback effect of this testing has an enormous impact on the time and focus that can be placed on CLT, with most educators teaching purely for positive outcomes in these assessments (Choi, 2008:40). This culture of testing does not encourage deeper learning nor allow space as Swain (1995, 1998) suggested, to foster “productive student learning processes” (Wickering, 2017:10). Educators must try to harness this inescapable reality of Korean education and use it for positive CLT purposes. This paper will investigate some of the causes for CLT failure in the Korean educational context, and discuss a possible avenue that communicative learning could travel down in an attempt to increase both English language skill and knowledge in Korean learners.

Rationale

The author recently spent 4 years within the Korean secondary education system and witnessed first-hand how the *Suneung* University entrance exam washback effect impacted upon students. Due to the overall lack of interest from learners in CLT within English classes, a desire emerged to investigate the space between the importance placed on English test scores and the lack of importance placed upon functional English language use. Could SLA techniques or research indicate how to close this gap, bringing about improved testing scores and increased interest in CLT, and would explicitly highlighting to learners the importance of output be a meaningful endeavour. An argument will be raised in this paper for using output or verbal communication as way to directly increase test results instead of an extra-curricular activity it is currently viewed as by many.

Output in literature

The shift from rule-focused approaches in teaching to a more meaning-based focus, can be attributed to Stephen Krashen in the 1970's (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). His assumption that language (including output) is improved by the sole act of comprehending input sparked controversy in SLA circles. Instruction and interaction with language had for many years been rooted in this 'input' side of the coin (Gass, 1997, cited in: Swain, 2000:97; Mackey, 1999:558), with the switch to a more output driven outlook taking some time to develop. The hypothesis that the *cause* of second language acquisition in a learner, is input remains a controversial stance to this day.

Long (1981, cited in: Swain, 2000:98), suggested learner 'internal modification' through incomprehension, not comprehension aided in their acquisition, in other words, lack of understanding assists with language learning to a greater extent as learners are forced to work harder and have a deeper connection with the language. This was later labelled neatly as 'negotiation' by Swain, whose (1985) study and conclusions into the lack of 'nativelike proficiency' from "considerable comprehensible input" (McDonough, 2005:80) formed the output hypothesis: An argument that input is not the *cause* of SLA, output is. (Or at least contributes to a greater extent.) Swain's (2000) work narrowed this output down to 'collaborative dialogue' (CD): knowledge building communication which constructs linguistic knowledge. 'Where language use and language learning can occur' (Swain, 2000), essentially mediating language learning through usage. CD pushes learners to have a deeper connection with the language used, than input. Learners have to work not only to comprehend others, but to discover what output is possible within their own language skillset.

CD has numerous benefits within SLA such as the facilitation of conscious syntax attainment. Breakdowns in communication result in negotiations of language meaning and education of linguistic construction (Ellis, 2005:306), "conscious processing results in the training of unconscious, automatic, zombie sensori-motor agents" (Koch, 2004, cited in: Ellis, 2005:312). Practice makes perfect. CD forces learners to create form in their language use in an attempt to avoid these breakdowns and aim for comprehensibility (Swain, 1985)

between their communicative partners. As these interactions are not always tutored or observed, there remains a risk that learners will be unable process their language to a satisfactory level in order for enough L2 progression to take place (Dornyei, 2009:35). Dornyei's observation that tutors would speed up a learners' ability to notice and monitor their language use; feedback from an interlocutor (Long, 1991, cited in: Ellis 2008:4), highlights the problematic subject of recasts: reformulation of learner speech without being explicit about the flaw. The use of recasting brings dangers such as caretaker speech; oversimplified language (Krashen, 1985, cited in: Liu, 2015:143), ambiguity; lack of understanding of the problem from a learner perspective, and depriving learners of the "complex language properties" (White 1987, cited in Liu 2015:143) which can arise from natural interactions. It may then be appropriate to suggest interlocutors either correct errors *explicitly* or allow learners the space to self-correct and negotiate meaning themselves through 'modified' output.

Self-correction or 'modified output' instead of interlocutor correction, has been demonstrated to have a large impact upon learner development (McDonough, 2005:79; Toth, 2006:328). Though the question remains, how many young learners are capable of self-correction through modified output. To do this, situations must be created to facilitate this noticing ability and allow learners to fill gaps in their L2 linguistic systems (VanPatten, 2003, cited in: Toth, 2006:324). Richard Schmidt's (2001:30) noticing hypothesis first published in (1990) maintains that "people learn about things they attend to" and without consciously noticing the problem, it cannot be learnt. The necessity of output in CD is for the 'hole' in learners' interlanguage (Swain, 2000) to be noticed when meanings are unable to be conveyed and addressed through continuous study. Whether or not these young learners are A) able to notice, or B) interested in noticing errors in their language use, may be of detriment to the suggestion. Linking this practice to higher test scores could solve the latter but the former would require explicit instruction (Izumi, 2002:543). Noticing provides the perfect evidence that more work must be done on a learners communicative ability and drawing attention to learners' 'gaps' through explicitly instructed CD should be the aim.

Usage led theories of SLA indicate that constructions are learnt while engaging in communication and "linguistic competence emerges from utterances and the abstraction of

regularities within them” (Ellis, 2005:306). The requirement to speak as opposed to simply listen provides unique moments where processing takes place at a deeper level (Izumi, 2002:545). Production triggers learners to pay attention. They are forced or ‘pushed’ into noticing, paving the way for the formation of successful abilities to “convey his or her own intent” (Swain, 1985:249). It is with these abilities either present or lacking which results in the reappraisal of interlanguage capabilities within a learner (Izumi, 2002:546) and where most progression is made with their target language. With respect to testing and test scores, comprehensibility, appropriateness and most importantly, accuracy are all increased when linguistic ability is “stretched to the fullest”. (Swain, 1993, cited in: McDonough, 2005:80). Reflecting on these personal experiences where language gaps are present, aids learners in their pursuit of language knowledge, language skill and ideally positive testing outcomes. The sheer importance of accuracy in this particular test-based context could be used to a greater degree as a motivator in CLT dialogue-focused classes and is often overlooked.

Dialogue and collective behaviour can be harnessed and stored as a mental resource (Swain, 2000). Initially creating internal realisation, the noticing of imperfections, and serving later as a tool for accuracy in testing and functional usage. The general understanding of the CD framework, is that through output and usage of language, L2 development happens by modification or addition of language which either is absent, or unsuited to the situation presented (McDonough, 2005:81). CD is designed to provide learners the space for this noticing and modification to take place, commonly with a tutor present. Schmidt (1991) argued that learners ‘incidentally’ learn through CLT, however, this is without the explicit instruction to learners that using their language is actually helping them to learn, instead of helping them just to communicate.

The Korean Test-Based Context

The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) which dominates the secondary education sphere consists mainly of reading and listening comprehension tests. (Shin, 2007). The difficulty in portraying just how seriously this test is taken in the country, perhaps allows those unaware

to assume incorrect similarities with GCSE testing. Educational assessment through the CSAT in the Republic of Korea is the gatekeeper of one's status and success in life (Kwon, Et Al. 2017:60). Rooted in history, this is how Koreans are sorted into its deeply-embedded hierarchy and a student's social mobility depends on it. Although assessment is seen as important in many other countries, the cultural context widely differs (Wickering, 2017:9). Socio-political environments have powerful influence over the 'practice and conceptualisation' of assessment (Teasdale & Leung, 2000, cited in: Wickering, 2017:9) and none more so than in Korea. Wickering (2017:12) ominously mentions how this obsession with summative assessments for social ranking purposes in East Asian contexts is leaving critical, creative and formative learning behind.

When CLT was first introduced to Korean education (Li, 1998:681) the clash of test-based Eastern educational theory with that of the West proved incredibly difficult for many teachers (Li, 1998:677). Fierce competition and crucial dependence on University admission remained, stifling this idealised deeper formative learning (Choi, 2008:39). Curran (2018:32) explains how for some learners equipped with English conversation skills, insufficient test scores still stood in their way. It is disappointing to hear from a Western perspective how the CSAT score is the main consideration for many institutions, instead of "academic interests or aptitude" (Kwon, Et Al. 2017:74). Educational reform may not be possible in such a historically traditionalist assessment-driven country with the washback of it seen as early as elementary education (Choi, 2008:58). The aim in Korea must be to pay closer attention to the learner and how their individual use of English production as a 'test-taking strategy' could assist them with their inevitable days of reckoning. The 'open secret' (Choi, 2008:41) that productive skills are not worked on due to their exclusion on the CSAT, means a suggestion of 'production use to aid and improve scores via noticing' may simply be too 'revolutionary' and time consuming for this context.

Korean society and its relationship with education is simply fascinating. The extent to which "The President, to average citizens, are emotionally invested in globalisation and the English language" (Lee, 2011, cited in: Curran, 2018:30) one would think, would allow new revolutionary strategies towards English learning to bloom. The Korean Ministry of Education recently abolished the National English Ability Test (NEAT), designed as an

attempt at assessment reformation in the direction of formative learning in the classroom due to a “bursting rise” in private education (Kwon, Et Al. 2017:75). Although Koreans are aware of the importance of English, it is still ultimately through the lens of the CSAT and assessment as a whole instead of a general competence. In 2006, Koreans spent roughly \$752 million on English proficiency testing alone, (Song, 2011:38, cited in: Curran, 2018:30) a staggering figure which surprisingly still leaves functional communicative competence lagging behind. In this context the focus is on good test scores instead of good English ability *leading* to good test scores.

Aside from determining if a student passes an individual class or module, assessment also impacts upon learner motivation, self-efficacy and their continuation of study. (Wickering, 2017:9). Unfortunately, some learners are being pushed away from English by the insatiable thirst from above to label and score them, instead of being ‘pushed’ to produce output in CLT classes deepening their understanding and use of the language in the process. “Tests are powerful tools that play a central role in creating social class” (Shohamy, 2013:226). If these tests in Korea cannot be removed, the teaching and practice of communicative English must be redefined in some way. As of now, the reputation of Korean learners being “orally non-proficient” (Curran, 2018:31) is in general “certainly rooted in reality.” CLT requires renovation, preparing learners for real life interactions, whilst equally emphasising structural accuracy (Celce-Murcia, Et Al. 2012:143). The inability to avoid the sharp rite of passage in Korea might be softened by the work educators do in the classroom through more focused CLT usage.

Explicit instruction = Implicit Learning

The current issue with CLT from a learner perspective, is that instruction and acquisition of language is seen purely from a usage angle. Students are instructed that they need to learn to speak English due to the globalisation of the country. Reframing this education may hold the key to both higher competence and higher test scoring. The two main approaches to teaching linguistic skills are *indirect*; competence resulting from conversational interaction, and *direct*; teaching micro-skills, strategies and processes (Richards, 1990, cited in: Celce-

Murcia, Et Al. 2012:141). CLT was initially adopted to do away with stale grammar-based learning systems, but it may actually be beneficial to combine these strategies together with a *direct*, explicit, communicative approach. Learning grammar through conversation where “new linguistic information is passed on and practiced explicitly” (Celce-Murcia, Et Al. 2012:141). Baars (1997, cited in: Ellis, 2005:312) maintains that being conscious of any material used results in the “sovereign remedy” for learning. Practicing these assessed components of schooling through conversational tasks, negates the negative reasoning many students place on CLT classes and brings forward which knowledge gaps require urgent attention. A balanced curriculum providing opportunity for meaning focused output, form focus learning and fluency development, (Nation, 2001, cited in: Ellis, 2005:340) combined with the inescapable reality that assessments on their language knowledge will be made, may bring up CLT’s effectiveness and desirability. It is unreasonable to test, which has not been previously linguistically explored in detail by the learners themselves. Connecting this CLT education with higher level goals such as University entrance and the riches that comes with it in Korean society, may begin to impact implicit behaviour, motivation and individual learning styles, with the ultimate goal being a clear rise of test scores in the subject.

A tutor or teacher, can form a communication partner (CP) to assist a learner with the scaffolding of these new constructions. Although ideally, this scaffolding will form from the learners themselves as they navigate their way to language meaning. Positive aspects of interactions may not be immediately seen (Gass, Et Al. 1998:304) which may prove difficult in the impatient Korean context. However, this does not mean the positive aspects are not present, they may show up in later language use. Interaction may provide structural benefit (Gass, Et Al. 1998:302) but it should not be considered a cause of acquisition as “it can only set the scene for potential learning.” Swain (2000) notes something similar; how “all L2 production is cognitive, particularly when learners use language collaboratively as a problem-solving tool, and in doing so, reflect on its use.” This act of reflection on language use is all potential learning. The more often a learner interacts and collaboratively solves language problems through dialogue, the more attention is brought to gaps in their knowledge and essentially greater learning and higher scores can manifest. As passing tests is essential for Korean students to access gatekept societal bastions, a temptation of higher

English ability *and* test scores may transform CLT's image into a highly desirable method of instruction. Preparation for tests through interactive dialogue may change the way learners think about learning the language. Reflecting, noticing and self-monitoring, is this possible with younger students. If the rigid structure of testing is unable to bend and facilitate greater CD, language skill seems destined to be left behind. With a few modifications to CLT centred around collaborative problem solving, it doesn't need to be.

Students monitoring themselves

It is implied that monitoring L2 production has a role in interlanguage reconfiguration. Swain (1995, 2000) titled this reconfiguration as encoding meaning as output; where learners and their CP pay attention to how far their knowledge can stretch, programming themselves for similar future interactions. In opposition, Tarone (1996, cited in: Schmidt, 2001:8) argued that individuals should not be considered "decontextualised information processors" and that the context, interactional pressures, embarrassment and stress, causes speakers to offer varying levels of attention to linguistic forms. The importance of an interlocutor cannot be understated, both in terms of utterance correction and motivational benefits. The rationale behind a redesigned CLT method, is that incorrect utterances are *encouraged* (McDonough, 2005:82) and used as monitoring tool. They are not negative. Any shame felt, or issues mentioned by Tarone (1996) must be left at the classroom door. A difficult thing to do for sensitive language learners of all ages, let alone younger developing students.

The desired outcome from output 'noticing' is in line with the noticing hypothesis; "learners must notice the gap, or mismatch, between their interlanguage production and the target form for acquisition to take place" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, cited in: Russell, 2014:26). The more utterance, the more mistakes, the more noticing, and ideally, the more 'grammatical encoding' (Izumi, 2003, cited in McDonough, 2005:82) would take place over time. Students collaborating via communicative interaction for the purpose of solving language problems, instead of the purpose of communication (Li, 1998:680) is the adjusted CLT method suggested. An overarching concern with this approach is the ability for students to achieve this, as learners may not have considered this as a reason for English study and may become

disorientated. (Choi, 2008:58). Their clouded assumptions that talking does not assist them, with their cultural goal of obtaining the highest EFL testing scores possible could be fixed with a lesson shaped around the concept. Not every student may be sold on the idea and it may take time for this practice to become adopted in some way, but it would be a start in revamping the dated and ineffective CLT methods currently taking place.

VanPatten emphasised in (2003, cited in: Toth, 2006:324) that understanding input is not “sufficient for developing the ability to use language in a communicative context.” Output is required and this leads to L2 acquisition (Toth, 2006:327). This is supported by McDonough (2005) who suggests learners practiced in output self-correction, demonstrate greater L2 development and consequently greater explicit language knowledge which is the focus of most tests in Korea. Modified output leads to greater L2 understanding. Given the contextual implications of Korean CLT education practice and assessments, it is unsurprising that the majority of Korean citizens are lacking productive English skills. (Choi, 2008:42). Regardless of the “time, money and energy they invest” there is no focus on speaking as a benefit to their learning and as a result has produced ‘book-smart’ English readers not ‘street-smart’ English speakers. (Lee, 2011:128). If this redeveloped CLT method is to be accepted and adopted in the Republic of Korea, fast results need to be visible at an early stage.

Link to testing scores

Izumi’s (2002) study of attention drawing devices produced some highly interesting outcomes. The study asks if (A) producing output impacts upon noticing of formal elements of a target language, and (B) compares output to visual input in regards to acquisition of the same target language (2002:541). Encouragingly, the findings were in favour of pushed output facilitating L2 acquisition; “output promotes (A) detection of formal elements, (B) integrative processing of the target structure, and (C) noticing of mismatches between interlanguage and target language input” (Izumi 2002:573). There is note however, towards noticing only assisting detection with additional instruction still advised. Learner self-correction then, seemingly unlikely to fully acquire target language structures. Although not

complete, knowledge learning can be significantly increased with this method. Schmidt's statement (2001:30) that passive learners are 'likely to be slow and unsuccessful learners' seems to be true. Noticing is the first step of the L2 journey, not the destination (2001:41). Pushed output increases the speed of acquisition only *if* accompanied by appropriate interlocutor feedback.

In relation to testing, the direct impact of pushed output remains unclear and may be the stumbling block for the impatient Korean context. It would however begin to address the 'not street-smart' (Lee, 2011:128) students generally produced from Korean English education. This paper is a long-term proposal towards L2 acquisition and may be suited to learners whose future and place in society will not hinge so precariously on testing. Current methods may be complimented by skill learning theory, but the question is, will students continue conscious *verbal* practice (Dornyei, 2009:39) of the language when they are preoccupied with their current workloads. Informing learners of the benefits to SLA which output brings, not for speaking assessments, but for noticing, is the start and not something to my knowledge is currently happening.

Dornyei clarifies this aim; (2009:42) "the essence of the principled communicative approach that I am advocating is the creative integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input". Perhaps inclusive of interactions not linked to assessments becoming a regular event in learner education, attempting to embed implicit acquisition through dialogue. Spada & Lightbrown (1993, cited in: Celce-Murcia, Et Al. 1997:147) are strong in their belief that form-focused feedback from an interlocutor coupled with English language dialogue contributes to SLA in both the short and long terms. Izumi (2002:572) is also complimentary of this juxtaposition and the creation of "favourable (SLA) conditions." Unfortunately, the short term is not short enough for Korean middle school students and as Li (1998:692) states; the favourable conditions are not favourable enough for their heavily pressured teachers.

Conclusion

Language production is considered by many to be a fundamental part of second language acquisition, but current attitudes and practices surrounding language use in Korea are not producing graduates with conversational abilities. Evident by the lust for test scores based on only grammatical understanding. This paper has argued for a revaluation of CLT use within Korean secondary classrooms not only in how activities are structured, but also how CLT is introduced to learners and their relationships with it. Swain's (2000) 'collaborative dialogue' definition states that this is "where language use and language learning can occur" and should be encouraged at all stages of education. Dialogues and behaviours can be harnessed and stored as mental resources, used at a later date when inevitable assessments take place. Izumi (2002) showed how output assists with the location of lexical flaws in learner interlanguage, but without the assistance of an interlocutor the full effects may not be seen quickly. The clash of patient Western education methods and East Asian learning styles stifle CD and do not allow CLT to produce 'street smart' graduates. There simply isn't enough time.

Testing is essential to the functioning of Korean society. It is how the country functions. Private education is heavily exploited to advance learners knowledge beyond their school grades. Instead of this practice, interactions in the target language in CLT classrooms would serve to focus their studies on particular areas or 'gaps' in their target language which may have been missed. Unfortunately, the mentality of a student will most likely not set aside time for this practice as the risk of 'falling behind' is simply not an option. Pushed output has a positive impact upon L2 acquisition, as it at least creates 'favourable conditions' for noticing (and modification) of language problems. But perhaps this approach is best suited to learners who are acquiring an L2 of their own free will as it is a long process requiring continuous practice. (Dornyei, 2009:39). If CLT is to be adapted to serve as a noticing tool and not as a communicative tool, its success also relies on conscious alterations from learners themselves when an interlocutor is not present. Are middle school students able to notice, modify, store, and recall these changes when necessary. More psychological research much be conducted in this area to have a definitive answer to the question, without this answer, there may be too much at stake for Korea to gamble with. CLT

undoubtedly requires a re-working. Explicit, direct instruction is gaining significance and teaching is moving away from just talking. Celce-Murcia, Et Al, described my suggestion as a “principled” communicative approach, (1997:147-8) not a complete departure from *indirect* CLT practice, but actually harnessing the ‘noticing’ aspects of dialogue as the reason for CD during English classes.

Korean students too concerned with making mistakes or being incorrect, might be missing out on the golden ticket to greater understanding of and ability within their L2, along with the higher scores that they so desperately crave.

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