

***Can a pedagogy encouraging creativity find space in the  
South Korean state school system to assist learners with  
their future English interactions?***

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## Introduction

Having spent four years between 2016-2020 teaching English communication in South Korea and attempting to establish a learning environment centred around spontaneity and unpredictability, I will question the TLT (teacher led teaching) methods employed by schools in South Korea which is not producing students comfortable navigating English conversations after their school examinations have concluded. Classroom approaches which plan for unplanned events, require active participation and discussions or debates, have been long documented as being difficult to deliver in Asian communities (Hu, 2002. In: Ur, 2013:471; Shin & Crookes, 2005:113; Johnson, 2017:188), and English continues to be presented to learners as knowledge accumulation instead of a creative tool for immediate purposes (Hu, 2002:87). Ultimately this leaves learners perplexed when the time comes to produce language with conversational partners. English classrooms in South Korea do not reflect the spontaneous nature of language and learners are left with an alternate reality of English, unprepared for the creative work they will need to complete in future L2 interactions.

Creative pedagogies defined as ‘teaching that enhances creative development’ involves creative teaching, teaching for creativity and creative learning (Lin, 2011. In: Liao, Et Al. 2018:213), and for the purposes of this paper refer to the aim of improving English learners unplanned conversational abilities. Creative pedagogy encourages teachers to stand back, ‘allowing learners to initiate dialogue and affords time and space to the development of their creative language use’ (Liao, Et Al. 2018:213). The pedagogy recognises creativity as an essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skill. (Kupers, Et Al. 2019:95) and harnesses low-structure environments and unpredictability, the ‘inevitable element of L2 classrooms’ (Hall, 2017:25), to encourage spoken use of English through enjoyment, exploratory material use (Tomlinson, 2012:143 In: Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018:2) and play. The tight grip which teachers have on their English classes in South Korea, squeezes students into believing the English language is something to be studied, instead of spoken. When released from this hold, learners are confused by the seemingly random ways English is used in general conversations. Put simply, language learners do not face ‘clear-cut, succeed-fail or correct-incorrect’ language situations outside of the class (Stepanek, 2015:99). Admittedly, there

are strong contextual justifications for the hold teachers have over their classes (Bell, 2003:327; Chung & Choi, 2016:3; Ro, 2018:541), which may explain why previous language learning methods such as CLT (communicative language teaching) have had difficulties succeeding in South Korea in the past (Li, 1998:685).

Creative pedagogy contains the possibility to deliver information South Korean students require for examination purposes in a way that builds in spontaneity, exploration and excitement (Herbert, 2010; Stepanek, 2015; Woodward, 2015). The pedagogy can leave students with an understanding that language classes involve active participation from all classroom parties, and that TLT methods which have previously had a 'magical hold' (Kumaravadivelu, 2001:557) over instructors are not the only way to learn and teach a language. Unpredictable learner discourse fosters creative cognitive engagement which is 'vital for language acquisition and effective communication' (Tomlinson, 2015:24), and creative pedagogies take learners 'beyond the limitations of methods' (Kumaravadivelu, 2001:537) which do not facilitate the educational variety (Bell, 2003:326) required to produce speakers comfortable with instant language production. As both teacher and learner roles develop using creative pedagogies, space is made for inventive and creative means of instruction holding language use as the primary aim.

This paper questions how creative pedagogy is defined and the origins of its formation, the pedagogic purpose of creativity in education, if creative pedagogy is welcome in or compatible with the South Korean context by examining social responsibilities in the country, and finally suggesting how it can feature in the South Korean English curriculum.

### **Creativity Development**

John Dewey was an early advocate of learner centred teaching approaches, dating as far back as 1938. These innovative theories were formulated to oppose the TLT which dominated education and suggested that language learning was grounded in learner experience not teaching delivery (Dewey, 1977. In: Thornberry, 2013:206). Johann Herbart (In: Kurtz, 2015:74) also encouraged instruction driven by such theory, emphasising the value of information delivered in the 'here-and-now' (Thornberry, 2000:2), harnessing the

spontaneous interactional flexibility afforded by new learning moments and creative learner contributions in low-structure classrooms. Herbart proposed that although classes could be thoroughly planned, doing so fails to orchestrate the entirely 'lively and fruitful EFL classroom interactions' (Kurtz, 2015:74) critical to foreign language instruction.

Dissatisfaction from ground level educators throughout the next two decades in regards to method-heavy approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 2001:538), along with a change in linguistic fashions (Cook, 2003:30. In: Hall, 2016:216), led to frustrations towards mismatching theories and the observable classroom realities. A re-evaluation of the requirements for effective ELT teaching was required, with scholars such as Larson-Freeman & Anderson (2011:9. In: Hall, 2016:2016) voicing that authors should not be 'seeking to convince readers that one method is superior to another, or that there is or will ever be a perfect method'. A powerful message which summarised the concerns of many educators in various subjects including EFL.

Fresh approaches to English education such as CLT (communicative language teaching) began to increase in popularity in some parts of the world, although rule-based grammar translation remained dominant in most ELT contexts. However, CLT approaches were yet more theories which brought with them familiar concerns, pre-determining what, where and when something should be taught or spoken. Narrowly conceived situational events including target language 'to be taught in a particular order, in particular lessons' (Allwright, 2005:11). English learners still focused on objectives and outcomes determined by the teacher (Crabbe, 2003:11) and the coursebook they worked from (Harmer, 2007:182. In: Thornberry, 2013:204), the opposite of learner-driven creative pedagogy. Material light approaches such as the infamous Bangalore project, (Berretta & Davies, 1985. In: Prabhu, 1987:146) and later Scott Thornberry's (2000) creativity-inclusive DOGME approach, began to push innovative thinking further into the mainstream. Although an extreme example of low-structure and something this paper is not suggesting, DOGME argued that overly planned education, in his case - materials and coursebooks, were not 'an essential element to the classroom' (2013:205) and 'far from promoting helpful conversation, were suffocating it' (2013:217).

### **Creative Pedagogy**

Defined above as 'teaching that enhances creative development' (Lin, 2011. In: Liao, Et Al. 2018:213), creative pedagogy harnesses the valuable unplanned discourse (Hall, 2017:25) that inevitably emerges from L2 classrooms. Creativity itself, although an elusive concept (Kupers, Et Al. 2019:96) and with no catch-all EFL definition (Stepanek, 2015:98), in this paper refers to open ended tasks or conversations which continue in unplanned directions. Planning does remain critical to both language teaching and learning, although the focus of this planning should include both richness of opportunity (Allwright, 2005:10) and exploration, not only specific target language. Planning should facilitate and encourage the spontaneous events which occur during English classes, which reflects authentic interactions.

Creative pedagogy attempts to flip the classroom scenario from teacher-centred to learner-focused, echoing Thornberry's (2000) DOGME aim but differing by including enough structure to be compatible with South Korea's demanding institutional curricula (Crabbe, 2003:18). Within a creative pedagogy teachers seek to deliberately 'create uncertain conditions' (Wright, 2005:123, In: Hall, 2017:25) by forming a low-structure environment with the aim of increasing dialogic opportunities. Learners are actively encouraged to take risks with their language and negotiate meaning (Hall, 2017:25), opposed to simply repeating pre-made, pre-determined statements (Allwright, 2005:11) which currently result in unsure, uneasy and unsuccessful conversational English speakers. English class becomes a community effort with the teacher 'no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught, also teach' (Freire, 1993. In: Xerri, 2012:60). Opportunities to increase negotiation skills, derive meanings, explore language patterns, gain valuable instant feedback from the direct community, or in general 'raise learning opportunities' (Crabbe, 2003:18; Ur, 2013:469). Aims not even the harshest of critics should be opposing.

South Korea's strict contextual parameters must be taken into account and analysed before creative pedagogy can be adopted in the country, and this remains the main stumbling block for progress (Li, 1998:677). Kumaravadivelu (2001:537) packages these interlinked contextual concerns as 'particularity, practicality and possibility'. 'Particularity' referring to

the local linguistic, sociocultural and political conditions allowing certain educational approaches (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004. In: Tasnimi, 2014:3) such as the implementation of CLT in South Korea (Li, 1998). 'Practicality' referencing the ability for teachers to 'practice what is theorised' (Kumaravadivelu, 2006:173) in their day-to-day classes, and 'possibility' recognising geographical socio-political realities and the power structures found there, which are vital to be noticed (Chen, 2014:18) and accounted for. Instruction in South Korea is often decided ahead of time, pre-scripted and pre-planned (Kurtz, 2015:24), following a highly predictable TLT dynamic. Using Kumaravadivelu's parameters, this instruction may be more closely related to the contextual particularities, practicalities and possibilities than instructor preference. TESOL practitioners in South Korea are only left a 'narrow space to function as fruitfully reflective individuals' and free to fully embrace creative pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001:540).

### **Context Obstructing Creativity**

Historically and similarly to their neighbouring nations, South Korea maintains a highly prescriptive national curriculum and a heavy, often crippling, emphasis on exam preparation (Ro, 2018:529). Within this structure, the position of a teacher holds certain expectations and requirements placed upon them by the sociocultural nature of the country. State school teachers in South Korea are fully 'accountable for ensuring productivity' (Spring, 2010:6. In: Ro, 2018:531) measured by exam scores attained by their students. Their primary duty standing as the delivery of predetermined knowledge (Allwright, 2005:11) in predominantly one-way interactions (Ro, 2018:531). Awareness that 'many different kinds of successful language learners exist' (Hall, 2017:165) is often ignored in favour of rigid control and traditional methods, and as noted, Asian communities regularly offer resistance to exploratory teaching approaches (Hu, 2002. In: Ur, 2013:471; Shin & Crookes, 2005:113; Johnson, 2017:188). Learners have unfortunately grown up understanding English language learning as knowledge accumulation for examination purposes, instead of a conversational tool or plaything for immediate purposes (Hu, 2002:87).

Approaches adopted by instructors should consistently take into account 'whom the method is for, in what circumstances and for what purpose' is it aiming to achieve (Prabhu,

1990:162) and be emphatically driven by them (Ur, 2013:471), instead of being discarded in preference for regular ways of 'doing things' (Borg, 2003. In: Ur, 2013:472). In South Korea, learners are acutely aware that a life-changing examination looms on the horizon, resulting in teaching approaches staying as close to the social business model of knowledge transmission (Shin & Crookes, 2005:114) as possible. The subject of English is different however, the use of it does not stop after students have had their day of reckoning. Many Korean students attaining high testing results to the pleasure of their social circles, remain unable to use the language in the spoken form confidently, accurately and in an unpredictable manner, which resembles an undeniable dilemma.

In a similar culture, Chen Et Al. (2012. In: Ro, 2018:532) discovered that despite giving more value to student-centred creative pedagogy, teachers in a Chinese school held little power to deviate away from the TLT approach as this remained what was expected. In traditional Asian cultures, English gets taught not learnt (Allwright, 2005:16), and much more significantly, not explored. Korean teachers remain sealed into a package that holds them completely accountable if subjects are not absorbed to a satisfactory degree (Hu, 2002:99), deterring them from risking their classroom authority and allowing students the freedom to be creative with their language use. Apprehension blocks creative pedagogical practice leaving out potentially productive classroom diversions (Allwright, 2005:14), and the understanding of their traditional classroom role obstructs South Korean learners playful, exploratory use of English (Tomlinson, 2012:143 In: Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018:2). Little space is afforded to using English 'spontaneously, experimentally, experientially and in an improvised manner' (Legutke & Thomas, 1999. In: Kurtz, 2015:74) in preparation for future conversations.

For creative pedagogy and language spontaneity to be accepted, traditional views towards a teachers role need to be addressed. In a culture where hierarchal power is omnipresent, the Ministry of Education's tight grip filters down to teachers and individual English classrooms, and the 'traditional authority' (Thornberry, 2013:3) patterns which exist may ultimately be too strong to break. As Kurtz outlined (2015:73), creative pedagogies involve invention, experimentation, risk-taking, rule-breaking, mistakes, and fun. None of which seem to feature, be welcomed or are encouraged in Korean state school English classrooms.

## **Making Space For Creativity**

Although no one, including the South Korean Ministry of Education, should be opposed to raising learning opportunities (Ur, 2013:469), creative pedagogy may have to take a back seat to avoid examination pressures. Designated time for teachers to talk ‘with’ learners, not ‘at’ or ‘to’ them (Thornberry, 2000:2) may need to be created, or perhaps the introduction of dedicated classes which learners enter with explicit instruction that they are free to use the language, exploring its meaning in an intentionally created low-structure environment similar to existing extra-curricular English camps. Unfortunately, the direct journey to language learning which involves explorative creative conversation and play (Xerri, 2012:61), faces gridlock. Space needs to be cleared within the exhaust-filled traffic cloud of politics, obligations, traditions, and exams.

There are numerous other restrictions impacting the selection of creative pedagogy which must also be noted (Li, 1998). The language ability of both teachers and learners, the willingness of learners to participate (Nhat & Hung, 2020:177; Kurtz, 2015:75), teacher education in creative pedagogy and the expertise required to handle spontaneous events (Luke & Thornberry, 2009. In: Nhat & Hung, 2020:176), and supportive institutions (Prabhu, 1990:166) are all examples of such restrictions. Ultimately, as Ur (2013:472) outlines, ‘if a teacher employs strategies and procedures that they believe are effective, and is confident that they can promote student motivation and learning’ everyone involved in South Korea’s educational hierarchy will be better off. Ignoring or blocking creativity, innovation and spontaneity in the classroom in preference for rigid, highly-structured traditional teaching methods because that is the way things are done (Borg, 2003. In: Ur, 2013:472), fails to prepare EFL students for flexible and effective language use (Tomlinson, 2015:24), which they will need long after their exams are over and their adult life begins.

## **Previous Studies**

Ro (2018) and Shin & Crookes (2005) investigated novice teacher and EFL student views towards the implementation of creative pedagogies. In positive conclusion, although small in sample, welcoming attitudes from both parties were recorded, highlighting that teachers



and learners may not be the main reasons for the continued use of traditional, restrictive methods.

Ro's (2018) study focused on novice Korean English teachers experiences, and 'to what extent their practice is affected by the Korean educational system' (2018:532). Most teachers admittedly employed a TLT structure as it was the 'most viable way to cover the content of the national curriculum' (2018:535). Jieun, one of the teachers studied (2018:535) stating explicitly; 'because I went to high school, I know what students need. A lecture, attached to the suneung'. This insight reflecting the 'apprenticeship of observation' phenomenon defined by Lortie (1975:79) as a lived experience constructing future teaching practice and beliefs. Although Jieun's intrinsic wish was to 'build students communication skills' as this was a 'more meaningful way to teach English', she reluctantly understood her unavoidable duties as a Korean teacher. Encouragingly, the teachers in Ro's study did mention experience and appreciation of constructivist approaches popularized by Dewey (1977:28. In: Thornberry, 2013:206) such as group projects and discussions during their teacher education, with another participant, Yubin, resisting the TLT approach by implementing 'provoking questions' (2018:538) in her English classes. To summarise, Ro's research found clear objection, resistance and dissent towards the expected teaching norms, alongside recognition that there are indeed other pedagogies possible in their restrictive context.

Shin & Crookes (2005) investigated student opinion towards low-structure classroom environments, with the aim to foster learning opportunities and exploratory English dialogue. The often-heard assumption that students in East Asian countries are too reserved, anxious and 'non-autonomous' (2005:132) to involve themselves in open discussions was challenged in two South Korean high schools. Initially, students justified their adversity to low-structure approaches because they 'were not used to discussions' (2005:119), indicating that they were not encouraged to speak out in their previous English learning. Once acclimatised to this approach, students began to vocally enjoy the class. 'This is the kind of English class I want', the topic is 'something they themselves chose', and very much 'unlike the traditional class where the teacher talks and the students just listen' (2005:120). Initially alien to many Korean English learners, 'actively participating in

discussion, leading the class, felt fun and good'. The study, although not comprehensive, showed receptive attitudes and again an acknowledgement of alternate class delivery. Students given the opportunity to use English as a language and not an academic subject, may over time begin to shift their engrained viewpoint and realise the long-term language benefits.

Ro's (2018) study provided evidence that novice Korean teachers were indeed capable of and willing to explore learner centred creative pedagogy, with the institutional and cultural systems 'reinforcing teachers to execute exam-orientated lessons' (2018:542), suppressing their own teaching aspirations. Their teaching skill judged on student exam scores, rather than their ability to achieve anything beyond that (2018:543). In this case, a student ready for unpredictable English conversation. A disheartening situation for teachers who recognise the intended use for a language. Alongside Shin & Crookes (2005) positive findings, there were also student concerns regarding exam scores. 'I have once had a teacher like you, I learnt a lot from him and liked it' (2005:120), but 'you said, if you study only for the exam, isn't it a shame? But I think that if we even get one question wrong, (*on the exam*) it is more shameful.'

The balance between heartfelt teacher ambition, recognition of conversational English use and enjoyment of the subject material is evidently overshadowed and overwhelmed by obligation and designated roles in South Korean society. Only a creative pedagogy positioned away from these obligations will allow language exploration to produce successful, confident English speakers.

### **Creative Suggestions**

EFL teachers in South Korea can be creators of their own 'micro-contexts' (Soto, 2014:40). English education can simultaneously cover material which is to be included in make-or-break exams whilst encouraging the exploration of English through spontaneous, engaging, creative pedagogy. Allowing instructors to break free from pre-determined restrictive methods can offer both EFL and Korean English teachers the chance to reveal previously

undiscovered language learning opportunities, lead to successful and enjoyable student language use and be accompanied by high levels of professional satisfaction (Ur, 2013:472). The difficulty for this to materialise through the use of low-structure English classes is the 'abandonment of the notion that lesson planning determines everything that is taught' and learnt in class (Allwright, 2005:15). Planning itself is not the dilemma, but for creative pedagogy to become the strategy for the improvement of conversational English ability after the university entrance exam, creativity and spontaneity through emergent dialogue should be encouraged and actively planned into lessons. This planning may allow low-structure 'micro-contexts' (Soto, 2014:40) to sneak into Korean curricula under the guise of highly-structured TLT, unlike the extreme example of DOGME which may appear aimless and inappropriate.

Tomlinson (2015:24) states that 'for over 50 years... I have yet to work on or visit a course where developing teacher creativity is an objective, or is even encouraged'. As shown by Ro's (2018) study, new teachers in Korea do hold creative desires for their students to improve their spoken English and should be encouraged to include these in their English classes through institutional teacher education wherever possible. The creative approach invites teachers to 'recognise and value the existing knowledge and diverse skills language learners bring to their classrooms and consistently encourage their contributions' (Stepanek, 2015:98). Creative pedagogy focuses on the innate productive skills all learners possess and encourages teachers to trust in the material learners can verbally create. Creativity brings into existence new and original ideas (Woodward, 2015:150) and changes the results of predictable, uninspiring and dull events, reinventing the subject for young learners. Language is creative by nature (Stepanek, 2015:98), 'every word we use is created in a unique moment' and leaving this aspect of language use untouched is ignoring spontaneous communicative creativity (Kurtz, 2015:73) which forms the root of all our conversations in English. A language teacher must pay their learners what they deserve, language education built from local and immediate concerns (Thornberry, 2013A:2) which fosters autonomous and exploratory communication. There is no reason why this communication cannot compliment the grammatical knowledge a learner must obtain for their South Korean educational passage.

Completion of accurate context and needs analyses using a framework such as Stern's (1983. In: Johnson, 2017:179), alongside reflection over a contexts educational philosophies, culture and habits (Bax, 2003:282), will facilitate the appropriate selection of materials and to what degree creative pedagogy can be implemented. These processes can set the tone for a teachers essential creative lesson planning. Waiting for oral creativity to emerge naturally is 'not effective and efficient enough' (Kurtz, 2015:73) and teachers must actively plan to create windows for improvised and flexible learner-regulated language use, to create a richness of experience likely to prove productive for later communicative use (Allwright, 2005:24). Creativity does not have to be limited to 'inadequacy presented speech acts' and tired activities presented in mandated materials (Ren & Han, 2016. In: Nhat & Hung, 2020:179). Woodward (2015:153) summarises EFL creative pedagogy as finding out what you usually do, what your learners expect, then doing something completely different. Planning for unexpected events, encouraging exploratory language and harnessing the element of surprise for pedagogic purposes.

## **Conclusion**

The encouragement of learner dialogue through unpredictable means is compatible with second language acquisition theories such as the output hypothesis and negotiated meaning (Swain, 1985:252). The pedagogic purpose of this dialogue being the increase of unplanned conversational English use in the South Korean curriculum (Benson, 2001. In: Crabbe, 2003:22), which will better prepare learners for conversational realities. The stumbling block appears to be a demand for proof of validity which comes in the form of outcomes, or test scores in the South Korean context. Ultimately, 'the presentation and mediation of opportunities is heavily influenced by the local context of learning' (Crabbe, 2003:22). The possibility of an exciting English environment of music, colour, fun, humour, and the thrilling 'balance between challenge and security, relaxation and tension' (Woodward, 2015:150) gatekept by the South Korean hierarchical obsession with grades. Despite this, both EFL and Korean English teachers can implement low-structure classes, which feature high student participation and offer creative opportunities which match learner interests, even though Korean schools may not be most ideal of sites for such creative pedagogies (Nhat & Hung, 2020:180; Shin & Crookes, 2005:132).

The opposition to creative pedagogy does not appear to come from novice teachers or the learners themselves. The stereotype of Korean English learners as passive is questionable, as it is just how EFL education has traditionally operated in East Asia with learners familiar with their pre-determined role of listeners, and altering this dynamic is not a simple task. However, teachers can take steps towards a creative and enthusiastic learning environment by introducing spontaneous communicative situations they wish to see their students thrive in (Tomlinson, 2015:28), inviting them to become co-authors of their own learning (Stepanek, 2015:103), and essentially presenting learners as the main speakers in a teacher-planned and led class. Teachers must be encouraged to make their own pedagogical decisions on methodology in accordance to their own beliefs, preferences and situations (Ur, 2013:473), as the adoption or insistence on specific methods at all times, comes at the debilitating risk of losing freedom, creativity and joy (Ro, 2018:543). Creativity with language can only flourish, if the institutions which hold a tight grip on teacher and learners, loosen their hold and finally embrace spontaneous classroom events as inevitable and essential (Kurtz, 2015:75).

The classroom should resemble a jungle 'where chance and challenge and spontaneity and creativity and risk work in complementary fashion with planned activity' (Mukundan, 2009:96. In: Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018:38). Language is a tool for communication and a plaything with endless possibilities, not a predictable, bland and linear experience.

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