Innovations in English Language Teaching:
A Comparative Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a decisive push in Japan over the past two decades to improve the general level of communicative English in students graduating from high school. Despite Japanese students receiving six years of formal English language instruction in secondary school, there exists a broad consensus that this has not been overly successful in providing students with the language skills necessary for international communication (Martin, 2004: p. 55).

One of the most commonly cited indicators of Japan’s English language shortcomings is the fact that the nation’s TOEFL scores consistently rank near the bottom of the pack among Asian nations (Noguchi, 2007). In a country that both prides itself on its education system, and a nation that relies heavily on access to the global market for international trade, this is a situation that sorely needs remedying.

For its part, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has since 1989 attempted to promote higher achievement in English among secondary school students by urging teachers to focus more on communicative skills in their lessons (Nishino, 2008: p. 28). However, as there were no set guidelines detailing exactly how this government policy should be enacted, it was left up to the individual schools to try and interpret it as they saw fit. Not surprisingly, this effort at reform was met with mixed results. Townsend (2013) gives a detailed summary of some of the main areas that caused problems for teachers, students and schools as they tried to introduce a more communicative approach to English language teaching in their schools.

More recently, in December 2013, the education ministry announced a new round of reforms to further bolster English study from elementary to high school which will go into effect in the 2020 academic year. Initially, English will be taught from the third grade in activity-oriented classes once or twice a week,
mainly instructed by homeroom teachers. From the fifth grade, English will be an official subject conducted three times a week by qualified homeroom teachers or specialized language instructors with a focus on fostering an elementary command of English (Kameda, 2013).

These reforms have prompted many public and private schools to introduce additional English language classes into their curriculum in the hopes of attracting more students. Such reforms, however, have to be carefully planned in order for them to have the greatest chance for success. This entails being aware of current research and developments in teaching and adopting those innovations that are salient and rejecting those that could cause problems. Introducing change, however, can be a very difficult process. It is important first to realize what potential obstacles lie in one’s path in the hopes that they can be safely navigated. This can be done by examining case studies of both success stories and cautionary tales of previous attempts at innovation.

Markee (1997) has constructed a framework that attempts to help those in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom better understand the dynamics of innovation. This framework is constructed by asking the question “Who adopts what, where, when, why and how?” This model can be applied to help us identify where past cases of attempted reform have been successful and where they have been unsuccessful. The degree of success of any given innovation can be measured using the concept referred to as diffusion. According to Rogers (1983), diffusion may be expressed as the percentage of adopters who implement an innovation over a given period of time. The more adopters who ultimately implement an innovation, the more that innovation can be considered successful.

In Part One of this paper Markee’s framework will be applied to Defeng Li’s (2001) study of Korea. Part Two will do the same for this author’s previous experience participating in an attempt at innovation in Soja City, Japan. While the attempt to innovate the Korean secondary school English language curriculum experienced many problems, Soja City on the other hand was considered in most regards to have been very successful. A conclusion will follow that will compare the two cases, highlighting major differences which could then be used for yet other attempts at reform.
PART ONE: KOREA

Who

All those who become involved in deciding whether an innovation will successfully be diffused are considered stakeholders (Markee, 2001: 119). While teachers are of course one of the key players many other stakeholders exist, all of whom play a variety of roles and can ultimately influence the outcomes of the innovation. Students, administrators, material developers and even parents are all stakeholders to some degree, and can affect the outcome of any reforms.

Adopters: in 1994 the Korean Ministry of Education adopted a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach for ESL starting from Grade 3 (Li, 2001: 151).

Implementers: secondary school English (EFL) teachers, principals and school administrators.

Clients: secondary school students.

Suppliers: curriculum designers, materials producers (including the teachers themselves) and teacher trainers, i.e., the Korean Teacher Education Program (KTEP) (Li, 2001: 152).

Change agents: The initial impetus for change came from the South Korean government’s desire to be politically and economically competitive in the world. With English being the lingua franca of the international business community, an ability to communicate effectively in English was deemed necessary for Korea to gain access to and be competitive in this vital market. The Korean Ministry of Education then issued their policy mandate. Other potential change agents included the students and their parents, though their reasons for promoting innovation were no doubt more personal, such as a motivation to improve their English language test scores or gain acceptance to a prestigious foreign university.

Resisters: Li identified a number of resisters including teachers, students as well as some administrators. Some of the main reasons for this resistance will be discussed in more depth below.

Adopts

Markee (1997) states that the process of adoption involves potential adopters evaluating the worth of an innovation, and identifies the four stages of this process: (1) gaining knowledge of the innovation, (2) becoming persuaded of its value, (3) making preliminary decisions whether to reject or to adopt and implement the innovation, and (4) confirming or rejecting their previous decisions (p. 83).
In Korea the fourth stage seems to be where the most serious obstacle to the diffusion of communicative language teaching occurred. Many of the teachers made very serious efforts to implement CLT into their classrooms, but eventually gave up after suggesting they experienced too many difficulties that made them question its validity in their sociocultural context.

**What**

Markee (2001: 121) suggests that the nature of any given innovation is best defined in terms of qualitative change, a term which covers all three levels of innovative behavior (materials, approaches and values). For innovation to be successful all three levels of innovative behavior would ideally be changed at the same time. When one aspect of behavior does not undergo the same level of change as the others the chance that successful diffusion will be realized decreases dramatically. It doesn’t make diffusion impossible, but it certainly makes it much less likely.

Unfortunately for Korea, while they made changes to the materials (new curriculum and textbook series) and approach (CLT), they did not make corresponding changes in pedagogic values. All English exams in Korea remained grammar-based, which did little to encourage the adoption of CLT. For students who have to pass a grammar-based entrance examination in order to attend the school of their choice there is very little incentive to spend finite class time engaged in activities that are meant to improve their communicative language ability. Likewise, there is a lot of pressure on teachers to focus on only those things that can have immediate and tangible results.

This failure to make systematic changes to the evaluation techniques limited the adoption of CLT by many of the teachers. Even if they felt strongly that CLT was the most efficient way to improve the English language ability of their students, the necessity to adequately prepare them for tests that had no communicative component was strong enough for many teachers to abandon CLT (Li, 2001: 157).

**Where**

Considerations of where an innovation is developed and potentially adopted should be viewed as a socioculturally constrained problem (Cooper, 1989). As such, adopters must be cognizant of the impact these contextual constraints might have on their actions. In Korea, traditional EFL is text-centered and grammar-centered, in stark contrast to the student-centered,
fluency-focused, and problem-solving activities required by CLT (Li, 2001: 161). Far reaching curriculum innovation involves fundamental shifts in the values and beliefs of those concerned (Brindley and Hood, 1990; Burns, 1996). Li stresses that such fundamental changes take time, and implicit in this remark is that South Korea has not made the necessary institutional changes to date.

**When**

Attempts at innovation usually start slowly, followed by a burst of activity if the innovation is considered useful. The Korean Ministry of Education’s mandate prompted the implementation of CLT across the country in a rather abrupt manner. As such, Li’s study details a large number of teachers and administrators who did not fully embrace this innovation resulting in a low level of diffusion. Many teachers dutifully adopted the innovation only to become frustrated and reject it later. This type of situation can be very damaging to the long-term success or failure of an innovation. When the teachers put in a solid effort to implement change, but ultimately come to the conclusion that it is unworkable in their situation, it is very hard to convince them later to give it another try. This is why it is so important to have a well thought out plan of action before instituting change, and to introduce this plan in incremental and manageable stages.

**Why**

The reasons why change occurs or does not occur are immensely complicated. As well, even if an innovation is adopted, it might have been done so by different people for very different reasons (Markee, 1997: 85). Li states that as well as the support offered by the government many teachers hoped and believed that CLT would help improve their students’ oral English (p. 154).

Unfortunately, there are other factors which stand in the way of successful adoption. Some teachers felt that the wholesale adoption of CLT was incompatible with their traditional teaching methods. Another concern was the high cost in terms of time, money and effort that CLT demanded in relation to previous methods. Teachers mentioned the lack of support as an impediment as they had neither the chance to view their peers using CLT nor access to qualified trainers to consult if they experienced problems.

As a result, many teachers felt adoption of CLT to be very difficult within the existing constraints of their sociocultural context (Markee, 1997: 86). Essentially, many teachers felt the resources offered were insufficient to deal
with such a large-scale attempt at reforming the English language curriculum in Korea.

**How**

In the adoption of CLT into the secondary school system in Korea a center-periphery (CP) model of change was employed. The Ministry of Education mandated the change and the administrators and teachers were left to implement it. Markee (1997) suggests that such top-down models of change effectively excludes those implementing the change from the research and development stage of the process, giving potential adopters little personal stake in making these innovations work. In the long run this can lead to implementers disconfirming their initial decisions. This seems to have been the case in South Korea (p. 87).

**PART TWO: THE SOJA PROJECT**

In 2000 the Soja City Board of Education decided to employ nine native-speaking English instructors to teach communicative task-based English lessons in their schools. This would come to be known as the Soja Project, with the expressed aim of developing the students’ communicative abilities in English, while exposing them to foreigners and different cultures. The private language school where I was working at the time as the head teacher was asked to develop and implement this program as well as supply the teachers who would act as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), team-teaching with the Japanese teachers.

This language school was particularly well suited for this undertaking as it had extensive experience with the theoretical underpinnings and practical application of the communicative task-based approach. Furthermore, the school had previously developed extensive resources that could be utilized by the teachers, including a fully developed and field-tested communicative task-based curriculum as well as a series of CD-ROMs containing stories, pictures and worksheets to accompany and complement this curriculum. These resources were to be used as a guide, with the teachers being granted the latitude to adapt the curriculum as needed based on the unique conditions and realities they were faced with at their respective schools.

**Who**

**Adopters:** the Soja City Board of Education adopted this program in line with the aforementioned 1989 decision by the Japanese government to reform English language
education. Under these reforms there was to be a concerted attempt made to shift away from the long-established grammar-translation practice towards teaching for communicative competence (Lamie, 2004: 115). While English was not obligatory in elementary schools at that time, it was generally recognized that the education ministry was planning to make it so in the very near future. The Soja City Board of Education understood this trend, and was attempting to proactively align themselves with the spirit of the proposed shift to a more communicative English language curriculum in their classrooms.

**Implementers:** secondary school teachers, principals and school administrators as well as the language school and its ALTs.

**Clients:** secondary school students.

**Suppliers:** curriculum designers, materials producers and teacher trainers at the language school. As mentioned above, the ALTs often produced materials to augment existing resources.

**Change agents:** the Soja City Board of Education. Other potential change agents were teachers and parents.

**Resisters:** the biggest source of resistance came from a limited number of Japanese homeroom teachers. While, for the most part, the relationships between the ALTs and the Japanese teachers were very productive, some Japanese teachers admitted feeling ashamed of their low level of English proficiency, which was only exacerbated by having a native English speaker present. As well, some were not overly happy sharing their classes. Their autonomy was taken away, and they had to spend time conferring with the ALT as to what they were going to be doing in their classes. Many of these teachers were completely unfamiliar with CLT, and it would take time and effort for them to become comfortable in their new roles.

**Adopts**

The rate of diffusion, while difficult to calculate in exact terms, was considered relatively high. While some resistance was identified very early, all evidence pointed to a general acceptance. Some reasons for this will be detailed below.

**What**

The Soja Project introduced a task-based communicative English program into its elementary schools as well as the necessary curriculum and resources to complement this approach. Regarding changes in pedagogic values, however, this was much less a factor than was noted in Li’s study of Korea. This is due in
large part to the fact that in the Soja Project the students were not tested on their communicative English language competence at the end of their course of instruction. As a result, and unlike Korea, the schools in Soja made a strong commitment to the continued allocation of class time devoted to communicative English language instruction. While it was not being assessed formally, it was still considered a very important part of the curriculum.

**Where**

The Japanese school system, for the most part, utilizes a teacher-centered approach (Lamie, 2004: 119). Such a system produces a transmission view of education, where the teacher is in control and the sole source of information while the learners passively receive (Kennedy and Kennedy, 1998: 459). English language education has unfortunately proven to be no exception, with most classes being conducted with the teacher at the front of the class lecturing the students about English, and the students having very little opportunity to use the language to communicate thoughts or ideas. Typically, the only time the students might even have the chance to vocalize the language is during choral repetition activities or when reading translated texts that are far beyond their ability to comprehend.

In terms of teacher and learner roles, communicative task-based learning requires a shift from teacher as transmitter of information towards teacher as facilitator of student learning. This requires learners to take more initiative in actively constructing their own knowledge and skills (Carless, 1999: 245). The teacher becomes more of a guide, helping students navigate activities and providing assistance with their language when needed. The use of ALTs in the Soja Project helped very much in this transformation.

As the ALTs have had much more experience with this type of teaching methodology, whether through the practical teacher training they received or having experienced CLT as a student when they learned a second language, they are much less socioculturally constrained than the Japanese teachers. As a result, when teaching CLT the ALTs are able to easily shift control of the classroom to the learners when appropriate. It also quickly became apparent that having an ALT leading the class took some of the reticence out of the students to take more control, enabling them to adapt to their new roles and behave in less traditional ways.
When

It is very difficult to calculate the rate of diffusion with a strong degree of certainty. That said, and in contrast to the project detailed by Li, it is generally considered that the Soja Project experienced a relatively successful high rate of diffusion. It is felt that this was in large part due to the few numbers of teachers rejecting the approach after initially supporting it.

Why

The decision by Soja City to introduce English into their secondary school system followed a general trend in which Japan desired to catch up with its Asian neighbors. A communicative approach was adopted due to the realization that the traditional methods of teaching English in Japan were not overly effective.

While Japan and Korea share a very similar adherence to a traditional teacher-centered approach to education in general, and a grammar-translation approach to the teaching of English in particular, there are some reasons why diffusion was more successful in the case of the Soja Project. The biggest reason was most likely that the cost in terms of effort was less of an issue with Soja. The schools in Soja were provided from day one with highly trained teachers conversant with all aspects of CLT, and who were well equipped with adequate resources to implement successfully communicative task-based activities in the lessons. While the Korean teachers lacked both the opportunity to observe their peers using CLT in action, nor have access to qualified trainers to consult, the Japanese teachers had the resources they needed to help implement the reforms with minimal hardship on their part.

Finally, sociocultural factors were less of an issue as the ALTs were able to assist the Japanese teachers with unfamiliar aspects of CLT. The changing roles of both the teacher and students needed in the CLT classroom can be very uncomfortable initially for someone not accustomed to it. For the Japanese teachers in Soja, however, the ability to observe successful implementation of CLT in the classroom by the ALTs, and having the students gain experience with this type of instruction, it was much easier for the innovation to be accepted.

How

Like the project studied by Li, a center-periphery model of change was employed in the Soja Project. Once the Board of Education decided to adopt a
communicative task-based approach the language school supplying the ALTs was left with the task of implementing it. Unlike the situation in Korea, the Japanese teachers in Soja had the support of the language school, and were provided extensive exposure – training – in the practical applications of the approach.

Some Japanese teachers, like their Korean counterparts, were initially not happy with the changes. They also reported feeling embarrassed with their English level, and were unhappy with the idea of sharing their classes. However, it was reported by the ALT teachers team-teaching with these Japanese teachers that almost all of those who initially were open to the change continued to exhibit a positive attitude up until the end of this author’s involvement with the project. As well, some of those teachers who had initially resisted the introduction of CLT into their classrooms eventually embraced it as a result of the support and mentorship provided by the language school and ALTs.

**CONCLUSION**

Through this examination of these two attempts at innovation by Korea and Soja City we have identified the major similarities and differences. The primary differences between these two cases include the scope of the two projects, the use of ALTs by the Soja Project, resources and training, and evaluation and testing issues. These differences are significant, and knowledge of them goes a long way in understanding the relative success of the Soja Project in comparison to Korea’s attempt at innovation.

In Korea sociocultural factors were identified as playing a huge role in many of the teachers’ eventual rejection of CLT. This approach requires teachers and learners to behave in ways that are not culturally appropriate to the local context. It was unreasonable for the teachers to be expected to make such radical changes to their teaching without providing them with the resources needed to make this transformation successful. If the change was introduced in smaller and incremental stages, it might have allowed the teachers to become more familiar and comfortable with CLT. Teacher training sessions would have also been very useful. The Korean teachers would have a chance to talk amongst themselves and discuss the unique problems they faced in their classrooms as well as consider potential solutions. Left alone with little support many teachers rejected the change and resorted to the more traditional
methods of teaching English.

One way in which the Soja Project avoided this potential problem was through the use of ALTs. While the Japanese teachers may be reticent to act in accordance with what is needed in a CLT approach, the ALTs were in no such way constrained. They could act freely in accordance with the methodological requirements demanded by CLT. It is not only the teacher, however, but the students who can also feel constrained by sociocultural factors. Both learners and teachers always come to the task of learning and teaching with perceptions of each other’s roles and duties (Kennedy, 1988: 333). It was observed that the learners in the Soja Project felt less constrained being taught by the ALTs, and could more easily shift from their traditional roles of passive receivers of information.

Another important difference was that the Soja Project was exempt from formal testing. Unlike Korea, where students and teachers alike felt compelled to spend a great deal of time preparing for grammar-based exams, the Soja Project was free to pursue communicative competence as their primary objective without concern regarding formal evaluation. It should be noted here, however, that this author feels adequate testing and evaluating procedures are perfectly capable of being introduced to both support and foster CLT lessons. In the future, if the teaching of CLT is to be successful in Korean secondary schools the corresponding tests and exams have to be changed in kind. As well, while the Japanese school system still relies heavily on standardized testing and examinations (Lamie, 2004: 135), if CLT is to be introduced as an obligatory course nationwide testing must accommodate this approach and not vice versa for successful diffusion.

The last significant difference is the amount of resources provided to the participating schools in the two cases. First and foremost was the utilization by Soja City of a private language school to develop the curriculum and resources used as well as provide fully trained EFL teachers. While there was some level of training provided to the Korean secondary school teachers, it was apparent from the responses of the participants in Li’s study that the training was inadequate.

As CLT takes hold in Japan as a viable method for improving the communicative English ability of students in secondary schools, and as teacher-training courses provide future Japanese English teachers with the appropriate
skills and practice to feel comfortable shifting from a teacher-centered approach to a more communicative language classroom, there will potentially come a day when ALTs will no longer be needed. In the case of Soja, however, the effective use of ALTs in the initial stages of reform has been shown to be very useful in alleviating some of those constraints felt in Korea.

This author concedes that implementing something like the Soja Project on a nationwide level might be very expensive. However, the alternatives might not be any better. At this time, many Japanese secondary school teachers are woefully unprepared to teach EFL in the classroom. Training and equipping them to accommodate this reform will take a tremendous amount of time and resources.

The ALTs in the Soja Project, in addition to teaching their lessons to secondary school students, provided workshops for their Japanese counterparts to help them become more proficient English speakers. Many of the Japanese teachers had no specific training to be English language teachers (nor wanted to be), but were appointed English teachers arbitrarily. As such, and mentioned earlier, many of the Japanese teachers were not overly proficient English speakers. English lessons with the ALTs helped boost their confidence with using English communicatively.

Furthermore, through being in the same classroom while the ALTs conducted their lessons the Japanese teachers were provided an opportunity to become familiar with the main tenets of CLT as well as how it should be used effectively in the classroom. It cannot be understated how valuable such firsthand and up close exposure to experienced teachers running a class can be. This would be something very difficult to convey accurately in a book or manual.

When comfortable, the Japanese teachers could assume an increasing amount of responsibility over the activities in the classroom, while at the same time having ready access to an experienced CLT teacher for advice and mentorship. This would greatly increase the chances for successful diffusion. Hopefully, as more and more secondary schools implement CLT in their classrooms from 2020, teachers will take into account some of the valuable lessons learned from previous attempts at innovation.

While large-scale reform always comes with serious challenges, there are ways to mitigate these issues. If a reform is deemed valuable, then the
necessary planning and resources should be devoted to it. In the case of Korea, this was not done adequately. While Korea can always make efforts to remedy some of the problems identified above, it will be a difficult task for the innovations to be fully realized.

As Japan begins to institute its reforms, it is important that the lessons learned from similar attempts at innovation are not ignored. Providing adequate resources to the teachers in terms of time and training should be considered paramount. As well, it is highly recommended that Japan make the appropriate changes to its English language testing so that there is less of a focus on grammar-translation and more of a focus on the assessment of students’ communicative language ability. If these steps are taken there is good reason to think that Japan will be successful in its plan to innovate English language education.

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