

Promoting social welfare in South Korea through learner autonomy and self-access learning centres

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Anyone with more than a passing interest in the field of learner autonomy would not have failed to notice that the parts of the globe where the movement toward greater independence in learning has taken hold with the greatest avidity are also those blessed with particularly robust and progressive public education systems. But what of the prospects for learner autonomy in places where faith in public education is far from assured? Places where private tutoring has become the new reality for a growing number of families—whether they can afford it or not? Such is the state of affairs in South Korea at present.

To say that interest in English education in South Korea is keen would be to understate the situation drastically. Indeed, the relentless drive to achieve higher levels of English proficiency has been decried in the press as a collective neurosis. Competition for access to qualified instruction has steadily driven the price of private tutoring to levels beyond the reach of families of low and moderate means. The result has been a bifurcation of academic attainment—a knowledge divide that adheres closely to the existing income disparity in society. The phenomenon, known domestically as the ‘English Gap’¹, has proven inordinately

difficult to root out. Although free and equal access to education resources is something that citizens might agree with in principle, these days few are willing to put their children’s futures solely in the hands of the public school system.

The situation as it stands today is that supplementary English instruction is available only to those with the ability to pay for it. Those without the financial wherewithal to participate must join the ranks of an ever-growing academic underclass. Not only are the members of this underclass shut out of the nation’s top universities, but they fail to rise appreciably within either the civil service or the private sector, both of which place exaggerated importance on one’s academic pedigree. As government education officials cast about for remedies (ranging from hugely wasteful English Village initiatives to standardized private tutoring fees), one possible solution has been overlooked time and again. I’m referring, of course, to learner autonomy and publically financed self-access learning centres.

That such seemingly obvious solutions have been ignored by policy makers as a means of leveling the academic playing field hardly comes as a surprise when one considers

¹ Plainly put, the ‘English Gap’ is a disparity in achievement on the English language portion of the state-administered standardized test used by

universities nationwide as the main criterion for determining acceptance.

how rarely it's discussed even among ourselves—professional educators with an interest in seeing the principles of learner autonomy applied in a broader range of situations. It is all but taken for granted that education is among the most powerful tools for promoting development and social welfare. Why is it, then, that those of us with an interest in learner autonomy and experience in establishing and operating self-access learning environments have not been more proactive in drawing attention to this potential niche for our discipline?

To return to the specific context of South Korea, recent years have seen the rise of two demographics that are particularly vulnerable to the 'English Gap' referred to above. Once considered a racially homogenous society, international unions now account for a large percentage of all of the marriages that take place annually. In accordance, children of mixed ethnicity represent an ever-increasing portion of the enrollment of public schools—especially in rural areas. All too often these children struggle beneath the double burden of poverty and under-education. The other group facing considerable adversity is composed of so-called economic orphans—children whose parents have relinquished custody due to the financial burden of providing them with adequate care. All too often these children lack the necessary support to partake in programs of study akin to those of their peers. For them, the prospect of bettering their circumstances through education remains out of reach. Educators and other concerned parties throughout the country are asking, 'Need it always be so?'

The issue of public education reform has been high on the agendas of successive governments as consensus has built around the view that the existing system is failing in a number of ways. In no area are the shortcomings more remarked upon than in English language studies. While those with the means to do so have flocked to private English academies (many of which employ native speakers alongside domestic ESL experts), families unable to afford the fees have been left to their own devices.

My personal awakening to the phenomenon detailed above came about as the result of my association with a girls' orphanage in the southern city of Gwangju. I observed that, despite the best efforts of a team of volunteer

teachers, the girls' performance in English fell far short of the standard set by those with access to private tutoring. It didn't take long to discover why. In many cases, children of middle and upper class households received ten or more hours of supplemental English instruction per week. Regardless of how well intentioned, it was obvious that a single hour-long class on Saturday afternoons was insufficient to surmount the deficit of instruction time faced by the orphan girls.

Clearly something more was needed, but it became apparent in talking to the volunteers (all of whom are expat foreign language instructors) that donating substantially more time was out of the question. As it happened, the scarcity of human resources was what eventually brought us to the idea of creating a self-access learning environment in which the girls could pursue further English study of their own accord. Using our connections within the community of foreign residents, we raised enough money to purchase learning materials and convert a small room in the orphanage to meet our purposes. Although we were quite optimistic at the outset, our modest self-access learning centre foundered. The reasons underlying our failure are perhaps best saved for another article, but suffice it to say that the trial and error approach proved a valuable learning experience for all involved. Despite the disappointing results, my faith that self-access learning centres were a viable means of addressing the English Gap remained unshaken.

Regrettably, at present neither learner autonomy nor self-access centres are being discussed at the levels where education reform generally takes place. As such, the efforts of our volunteer English teachers² have been unassisted by any form of governmental

² Currently our group of volunteers is composed entirely of ex-pat English language instructors from Canada, America, the UK and Australia. Due to the nature of the overseas ESL industry, our volunteers turn over more regularly than I would like. Thankfully, we have a core of four semi-permanent volunteers who work at post-secondary institutions in Gwangju, South Korea. While my personal area of interest is the SAC, other volunteers look after fund-raising with the ex-pat community (which is the source of almost all of our funding). There is an informal group (not a registered charity) known as the Sung Bin Volunteers, but this is basically composed of the same people who serve as regular volunteers.

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support. However, our hope remains that a functioning self-access environment will serve as a model that other volunteer groups or government agencies can follow. To this end, in February of 2010 we launched our second attempt at creating a self-access centre for the orphan girls of Gwangju.

Unlike our initial effort, which was long on good will but short on forethought, our subsequent attempt was preceded by months of planning and reflection. We considered every aspect from layout and design to resources to hours of operation. Due to changes at the orphanage, the users were likely to be much younger than we'd originally expected, and we were obliged to alter our plans mid-stream. Focus shifted from the resources themselves to designing programs that modeled correct use of the materials on offer at the centre.

Other innovations we stumbled upon almost by accident. After leaving behind a music CD, our volunteers were shocked to discover that by the following week the girls had memorized several of the songs. This led to the decision to support and promote 'communities of learning' in which groups of girls form study groups based on common interests. We incentivize the formation of these groups by procuring resources catered to their interests and offering them exclusive use of the centre for their meetings. At present we have a singing club, a storybook club, and a burgeoning drama club. Our next step will be to formalize cooperation with a local education university to establish a mentorship program which will see trainee teachers act as monitors and learning advisors for the centre.

It is still early days, and the future of our self-access learning centre is far from assured. However, the wisdom acquired through our initial failure seems to be bearing fruit. Hopefully this time we will succeed in establishing a lasting centre, capable of mitigating the existing inequality in English education in South Korea. My motivation for bringing this experience to the attention of the wider community of teachers with an interest in learner autonomy is to encourage reflection and discussion on the role of self-access education in promoting social welfare and development. Further investigation in to the type of application detailed here can only strengthen the movement toward greater independence in learning—something all who read this would welcome, I'm sure.