

**Teaching Methodology in a 'Large Power Distance' Classroom
A South Korean Context**

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Introduction

This paper looks at South Korea as an example of a collectivist society having a rather large power distance dimension value. In a traditional Korean classroom the teacher is at the top of the classroom hierarchy, while the students are the passive participants. Gender and age play a role in the hierarchy between students themselves. Teaching methods and methodologies need to be carefully weighed and examined before applying them to the Korean classroom setting as there are many determining factors that need to be taken into consideration before they can be used effectively in the second language classroom. Examples of these determinants are student motivation, cultural background and the intended use of the L2 (Second Language). Effective and ineffective teaching methods and methodologies for the Korean L2 classroom will both be examined. The Korean classroom setting, in which the author teaches English as a second language, will be used as an example, as it is set in a collectivist environment with a history of Confucian influence, facilitating a large power distance teacher-student and student-student relationship. The author is a Canadian with eight years of combined TEFL experience in Hungary and Korea; therefore his teaching experiences will be cited as examples.

1 Collectivist Society

Collectivism expects individuals to make personal sacrifices for the well being of the society.

Collectivism is the condition where the self is denied in terms of group membership (interdependent self construal in terms of in-group membership), high value is placed on collective identity and interdependence, the demands and interests of the group take precedence over individual needs and desires, social behaviors are more likely to be driven by social norms, duties, and obligations. (Ferrera, 2003)

Perhaps the main reason why Korea is a collectivist nation is because of its long Confucian history. The Confucian ideology has a tendency to institutionalize 'Large Power Distance' (LPD) relationships among the members of the family and the people of the state.

1.1 South Korea as a 'Collectivist Society' that's undergoing Change

In order to show that South Korea falls in the Collectivist category, it should first be stated that every young man with no physical disability is drafted in to the armed services of the Korean Republic for a period of no less than two years. In this way the young men of Korea make personal sacrifices for their state. Furthermore, the 4000 year old history of this republic needs to be examined in order to effectively observe it as a model of a Collectivist Society. Korea has seen itself build one of the world's most powerful economies in the world, starting from around 1970 at which time it was still mainly an agricultural nation. This fact enables one to observe Korea, without difficulty, as a changing society. Nevertheless, its long history needs to be studied to better understand where the Korean way of life originated from. It's perhaps best to start by examining its Confucian past.

1.2 Confucian Korea

Koreans are till this day influenced by the ideologies that Confucian teachings have so deeply embedded into the Korean social structure for more than a thousand years. According to Cortazzi, "Confucianism, with its emphasis on family values and respect for age and learning, has been particularly influential on the Korean way of life." (Cortazzi in Finch, 2000: Ch. 2.4.2) Underwood says: "Korea is a Confucian society. Everyone is Confucian, including the Christians." (1998:85) It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time Confucianism entered Korea, however it is known that it already had a strong foothold by the fourth century AD. Confucianism persuades individuals to make sacrifices for the well being of the state, hence this places traditional Korean society in the realm of collectivism. Although Confucians put a high value on education, it wasn't until 1443 when King Se-Jong De wang created 'Hangul' the Korean phonetic alphabet that common people learned to read and write.

...after this new alphabet was created, the government engaged in a tremendous amount of publication activity to educate the entire population so that everyone would live according to Confucian teachings. (June-Ock Yum in Kincaid, 1987:76 Ch.5)

Following the development of Hangul, people of all social positions could begin to read and write, and the Confucian statesmen capitalized on this by posting publications that clearly conveyed the five moral codes of Confucianism to the general public, making its ideology the norm for the

Korean people. The five moral codes:

Confucianism devised five moral codes to regulate the five basic human relationships: loyalty between king and subject, closeness between father and son, distinction in duty between husband and wife, orders between elders and youngers, and distinction in faith between friends. (June-Ock Yum in Kincaid, 1987:71)

Every individual was appointed a hierarchical position which prescribed the nature of his/her relationships with other members of the society, and this is still evident in Korea today. Underwood reinforces this by stating: "Well, you knew that Korean culture was hierarchical. But do you know what that really implies? I mean, it's arranged vertically!" (1998:85) Koreans only treat each other as equals when they are the same age and of the same gender. All other individuals are to be placed at higher or lower positions on the hierarchical scale. Consequently Large Power Distance Relationships are formed.

1.3 Power Distance in a 'Collectivist' Society

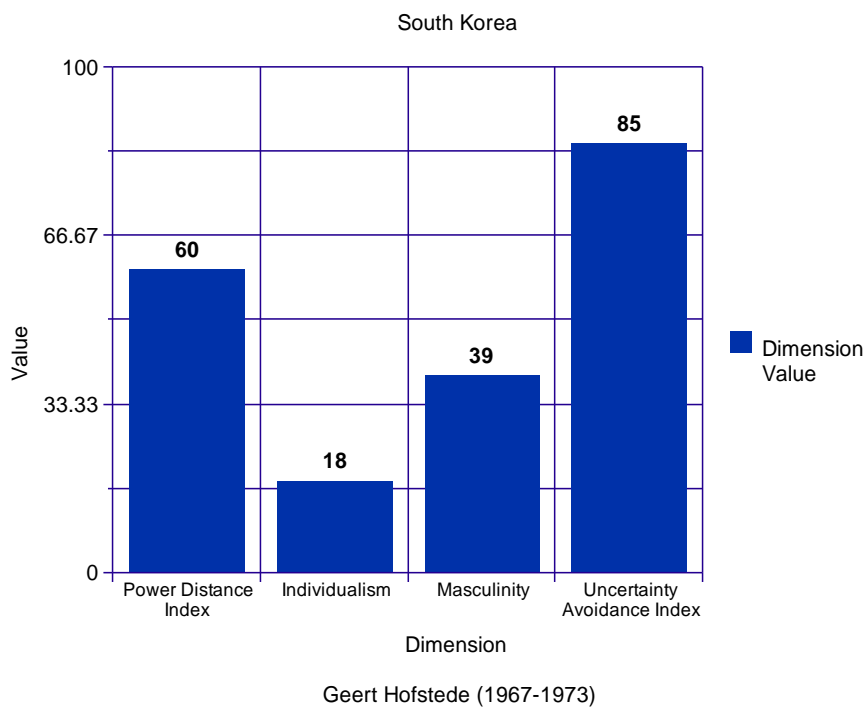
In purely collectivist societies all individuals make sacrifices for their state, placing their own interests below that of the state. The individual's personal rights are generally eclipsed by the needs of the community, placing the person's interest below that of the state. It is therefore evident that there exists a large power distance relationship between the individual and the statesman of such a society.

1.4 South Korea as a Large Power Distance society

Geert Hofstede conducted cultural research for 66 countries from 1967 until 1973, giving South Korea a power distance dimension value of 60 out of a possible 100. (See Figure 1) This number translates to a value of 60%, which gives Korea a relatively large power distance figure. Korea also received a value of 18 for individualism, placing the individuals at the service of the society with little individual freedoms. This in effect gives the country a high collectivist value, since pure collectivism and pure individualism are opposite extremes. It must also be taken into account that it's been 32 years since Hofstede completed his research, and Korea was largely an agricultural nation then. Modern day Korea is a changing society and there are gaps between the generations. Even so, the basic fundamental cultural principles that shaped Korea 30 years ago still exist today. They are increasingly lacking the support of the younger generations of Koreans who are becoming ever more westernized, yet there is still a relatively large power distance between the members of the modern day Korean family. It must be kept in mind that trends are changing, but they haven't completely vanished. (Underwood) "Korean Culture is changing, but slowly." (1998:91) "...-yes, everything changes, must change; but at the same time in some ways nothing changes, particularly in people and relationships." (1998:90) On the whole, age and gender are perhaps the main determinant factors in shaping a person's social status in Korea. Older men generally have the most power in the society. The large power distance dimension does not only affect the family and the social structure of the nation, but also to the Korean classroom

setting.

Figure 1 (Hofstede, 1967–2003)



1.5 Power Distance in the Korean Classroom Environment

There exists a large inconsistency in power between teacher and student in the Korean classroom. The teacher is always respected in and out of the classroom. The values of the Confucian ideology are a key factor in the creation of this gap in power between the student and teacher. Hofstede says: "In the Chinese Confucian tradition, 'teacher' is the most respected profession." (1986:304) The Confucian statesmen of the Josun Dynasty

placed a very high value on education, and thus the teacher received a great deal of respect from his students. The student was his master's apprentice, receiving individual attention from his master, thus his future depended solely on his master's good will, making it in the learner's deepest interest to respect his instructor.

2 Student-Student Interactions

It is essential for students to interact with one another in the 'Second Language' (L2) classroom as it serves to facilitate language acquisition through oral practice. If students are to acquire good oral communicational skills, they should participate in conversational activities among themselves to put the L2 to verbal use. Consequently student-student relationships warrant great importance in L2 acquisition.

2.1 Teacher-Student Power Distance Effects on Student-Student Relationships

The manner of relationships between students is affected by teachers exercising authority in a teacher centered class. There is normally little student-student interaction within a traditionally structured Korean classroom setting as students are encouraged to speak only when they are invited to do so by their teacher. Students do interact in helping each other understand and do normally solve problems collectively, but typically using very little dialogue. If one person has the answer to a problem they normally share it with the

others by letting them copy it. L2 dialogue is something they are seldom taught by the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) [See sections 2.5 & 4.5] predominantly in use within the Korean public school system. It is therefore very difficult for language teachers to persuade students to communicate in an L2 classroom environment conditioned by the GTM.

2.2 Age Determines Student-Student Relationships

The difference in age between students themselves also has an effect on student-student interactions. When an older student walks into the classroom, the younger ones usually bow in respect. One of the author's students is a 50 year old man. He has little incentive to produce English dialogue with any other student. This older gentleman's behavior is seen as natural by most Koreans, as he is appointed special status by the Confucian values inherent in the system. Older students usually get away with much more than the average student in the Korean university system.

2.3 Gender Determines Student –Student Relationships

Males often occupy one side of the classroom while females are situated on the other side. Many Korean high schools are gender specific, and often there is little interaction between the genders before they enter university. Males generally talk to other males and females to other females, and it makes it difficult for the teacher to persuade freshmen of opposite genders to produce meaningful dialogue among themselves.

2.4 Inhibited Student-Student Relationships in South Korea

It is evident from the popular viewpoint of today that the element of Communicative Language Teaching stressing content rather than structure is valued highly by many professionals; however it's not an easy thing to implement into the **Korean L2** classroom environment. Given that the average Korean student has been taught L2 through the Grammar Translation Method in the public school system before entering university, how can the teacher justly expect these introvert students to rapidly uproot this deeply embedded habit and develop into extroverts compelled to put the L2 to productive oral communicative use.

...many teachers are convinced that extrovert learners who interact without inhibition in their second language and find many opportunities to practice the language skills will be the most successful learners.(Lightbown & Spada in Candlin and Mercer, 2003: 28)

It is beneficial to encourage Korean L2 students to become less inhibited in being vocal with one another; however this effort to do so is countered by the Korean education system under the influence of Confucianism.

2.5 The Grammar Translation Method Hinders Student-Student Relationships

Brown best describes the limited effectiveness of the Classical Method, which (Brown) "in the nineteenth century...came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method" (1994:52), in its traditional application, using the following quote:

Little thought was given to the time to teach someone how to speak the language: after all, languages were not being taught primarily to learn oral/aural communication but to learn for the sake of being scholarly. (Brown, 1994:52)

Although the Grammar Translation Method is outdated as a language teaching method, it is nonetheless the norm in the Korean educational system. The method is defined as follows:

Grammar Translation is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by the application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. (Richards & Rodgers, 2004:5)

It is difficult for students to get away from of this language learning style. Students thus need a lot of encouragement from the teacher to become actively involved in functional dialogue between them, within the Korean L2 classroom setting.

2.6 Teachers should Encourage More Student-Student Interactions

One way for teachers to encourage their students to vocalize the L2 is by using a lot of positive reinforcement which can improve student motivation. Perhaps it's not so much the methodology the teacher uses in the L2 classroom setting that determines student-student relationships, but rather the manner in which it is applied. A teacher should not only be an educator but also a motivator of his/her students. It is the teacher's duty to facilitate

language learning in all kinds of classroom environments, and the proper understanding necessary for the teacher to successfully facilitate an effective method of language learning in the classroom is perhaps best acquired if the teacher first learns about the cultural norms of the students, so that he/she can relate to them in a way that would best encourage them to interact freely with one another. Hofstede argues that “ ‘Information’ is more than words – it is words which fit a cultural framework.” (1986:316) Consequently the teacher needs to have a basic understanding of the learners’ culture, to properly facilitate learning. It is the teacher’s approach toward his/her students that puts the students into the desired mind frame necessary to compel themselves to communicate with others in a meaningful fashion. Teacher-student interactions therefore have a definite impact on student-student interactions in the Korean L2 classroom, since the teacher is an authoritative figure in the class when one views the classroom setting from a traditional Korean point of view.

3 Teacher-Student Interactions

The teacher is not only there to facilitate language learning, but he/she must also initiate dialogue between the students if an improvement in their oral skills is to take place. The teacher must explain to the class, to the best of his/her ability, the cultural differences that exist between the ‘Native Language’ (L1) environment and that of the L2, so they can begin to understand not only the importance of their L2 abilities but also it’s suitable

implementation into the L2's native environment. Showing a film that exhibits many elements of the L2 culture might be useful in achieving this. In addition students should also be provided an L2 program that is compatible with the students' culture.

Bickley (1989) and others (e.g. Clarke & Clarke 1990:31; Cortazzi 1990:54; Scovel 1994) point out that learning styles are not only affected by individual differences in ability, personality and motivation, "but also, perhaps predominantly, by cultural factors" (Bickley (1989:15). Scovel (1994:214) sees personality characteristics as part of cultural norms, and for Valdes (1990:29) "culture ... penetrates all the corners of language education". It is important therefore that this all-pervasive factor be taken into account at every level of programme design and implementation. (Bickley, Clark & Clark, Cortazzi and Schovel in Finch, 2000)

A familiar environment, where students can feel free and be compelled to interact with one another, able to efficiently practice the L2 in a verbal form according to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), should therefore be created by the teacher.

3.1 Power Distance Effects on Teacher-Student Interactions in South Korea

Most Korean teachers approach teaching in a similar fashion, whereby they lecture the students on the relevant material using academic language and a teacher centered approach, expecting the students to memorize everything successfully. This kind of a classroom has only

one way communication occurring in it; from teacher to student. It might be useful to look at student and teacher expectations in large power distance societies if we are to better understand the Korean L2 classroom atmosphere on a deeper level.

3.2 Expectations of Teachers in a Large Power Distance Society

Teachers in a large power distance society are expected to have the answers to every problem and are expected to use academic language when lecturing their students. According to Hofstede: *Teachers are* - (1) wise (2) respected in and out of class (3) never contradicted (4) to outline student paths (5) credited with student excellence (6) always right (7) respected more with age - *in a large power distance society*. (1986:313):

3.3 Expectations of Students in a Large Power Distance Society

Since large power distance classrooms are teacher centered, it is expected that students remain politely quiet until their teacher signals them to speak. According to Hofstede: *Students are* – (1) expected to speak up only when invited by the teacher (2) to follow a strict order (3) to respect the teacher at all times (4) to listen to the teacher giving lectures - *in a Large Power Distance Society*. (1986:313):

3.4 Large Power Distance Classrooms Provide an Ineffective Setting for L2 Acquisition

A large power distance classroom setting is not beneficial for the implementation of practice based language teaching methodologies, since the classroom setting is teacher centered. Furthermore, upon examining the conviction that students do not initiate dialogue in a large power distance setting, and were never expected to do so before, it should be evident that they will find it awkward and difficult to shed old habits and take on strange new ones requiring them to transform their learning styles. The implementation of Communicative Language Teaching must therefore be done in a carefully maneuvered step by step manner whereby students are introduced to only one phase of the CLT at a time.

4 The Adaptation of Teaching Methods and Methodologies

There are many different kinds of methods available for teaching a second language. Most methods are outdated as CLT has gained widespread popularity. First, there was the (Richards & Rodgers) “study of classical Latin” (2004:3) now a dead language. It later became known as the Grammar translation Method (The Prussian Method), and was followed in no particular order by; the Goulin and Series Method, the Direct Method (Berlitz Method), the Audiolingual Method (The Army Method), the Community Language Learning Method, Suggestopedia, the Silent Grammar Method, the Total

Physical Response, the Natural Approach, Situational Language Teaching (Oral Approach) and Communicative Language Teaching, to list a few. Periodically a new method was introduced into the language learning field, replacing the one previous to it. Each new method borrowed some of the functional characteristics from the methods they came to replace, and in this way conscious L2 learning has gradually evolved into L2 acquisition based on (Richards & Rodgers) “the natural assimilation of language rules through using language for communication.”(2004:22). Brown states:

Albert Mackwardt (1972:5) saw these “changing winds and the shifting sands” as a cyclical pattern in which a new method emerged about every quarter of a century. Each new method broke from the old but took with it some of the positive aspects of the previous practices. (Brown, 1994:52)

How long will Communicative Language Teaching, (Howatt in Richards & Rodgers) “return[ing] to a traditional concept that utterances carried meaning” 2004:153), be popular? All methods are deemed to fall, receiving patronage from some experts while other experts contest them. Who is to say this new teaching technique will not be outdated one day. Perhaps science has been on a misguided course for the past century, always searching for new methods, as the Communicative Methodology was in front of scientists’ noses the whole time given that common people have been implementing components of it for thousands of years to acquire second languages through using the L2 in meaningful situations occurring in everyday settings. Languages weren’t learned by ordinary people for the sake of being scholarly,

but rather for their communicational value.

4.1 Communicative Methodology in a Large Power Distance Classroom

It is plausible that the Communicative Methodology in language teaching would only (Richards & Rodgers) “receive widespread support” (2004:9) if societies are truly ready for its implementation. Nevertheless, it must be stated that implementing the methodology into a LPD Korean L2 classroom, where the didactic approach of the foreign teacher is different than the constructivist approach the students are used to, is not a simple task, therefore all teachers need to take a critical look at its suitable implementation. Hofstede adds to this idea by stating the following:

Teaching to a student or student body with a cognitive ability profile different from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic; it demands a different didactic approach, for which the teacher may lack the proper cognitive abilities. (Hofstede, 1986:305)

A large power distance classroom requires the new methodology to be applied into the L2 classroom using step by step integration. Other methods need to be introduced before CLT, with a (Richards & Rodgers) “focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures” (2004:153) can effectively be applied. It would be fitting to look at the methods which are effective and ineffective for use during the calculated implementation process of

Communicative Language Teaching.

4.2 Effective Methods in South Korean L2 classrooms

Since South Korean students are generally shy and do not like to speak up in the language classroom, they need to be eased into a content based approach in which they use the language actively and independently. (Richards & Rodgers) “According to Frank [F.], a language could best be taught by using it actively in the classroom.” (2004:11) Western students are generally perceived to be to be more dynamic and independent in the classroom so they most probably find it less difficult to learn in the conceptual framework of a more independent Communicative Methodology; in which the teacher leaves it to the students to examine the problems they are having, and leaves it to them to find solutions for those problems. In Asian classrooms, students expect teachers to recite information, so they aren’t used to being independent. When they are asked to work independently, they most likely feel lost as they don’t have any experience in making choices since the teacher is expected to make them. It is often necessary to teach the learning habits required for L2 acquisition in a number of steps. Vygotsky’s concept of scaffolding is an example of how teachers can help their students become more independent through a step by step buildup of the skills required for effective L2 acquisition.

In scaffolding instruction a more knowledgeable other provides scaffolds or supports to facilitate the learner’s development. The scaffolds facilitate a

student's ability to build on prior knowledge and internalize new information. The activities provided in scaffolding instruction are just beyond the level of what the learner can do alone (Olson & Pratt in Van Der Stuyf, 2002).

Aside from building language learning skills in the students, teachers also need to introduce new methodologies into the classroom using a carefully designed set of steps.

4.3 Steps Required to Effectively Introduce the Communicative Methodology into the Korean L2 Classroom

Incorporating the Audiolingual Method for a few lessons at the starting point, with the intent of getting students repeating set sentence structures in an effort to encourage vocalization, followed by the implementation of the Situational Language Teaching (SLT) which teaches basic L2 through the technique of drilling sentence structures in a word substitution framework, using an assortment of vocabulary, are necessary to facilitate Communicative Language Teaching in which individual choices should be made freely. CLT is not easily applied to the average Korean classroom, despite the fact that David Nunan made mention of the methodology working in Hong Kong and Thailand. However, it must be stated that since most countries in Asia have their unique history, L2 students from different Asian nations should be viewed as having diverse L2 classroom settings. Nunan states:

It has been suggested that the notion of choices is a Western one, which doesn't work in Eastern education contexts. All I can say is that it works in Hong Kong. I was also able to make it work in Thailand. (Nunan,1999:21)

4.3.1 CLT in Hong Kong and Thailand

Hong Kong is the most multicultural city in Asia, and the fact that it was a British Colony from 1841 to 1941, where English is widely spoken today, must not be overlooked. It has been influenced by western cultures for many decades. Students there have been westernized, more so than the average Asian student, and have a marvelous setting for practicing real life English out of the classroom. Thailand is a country built around tourism and Thai people's ability to speak foreign languages is often necessary for their basic survival. Thus it's fair to say they are motivated to actively participate in L2 acquisition. (Lightbown & Spada in Candlin & Mercer) "...in informal language learning settings, highly motivated learners may be more successful when the proficiency test measures oral communication skills." (2003:30) It can thus be said that in theory the skills of learners from these two countries are better suited to CLT which facilitates an informal classroom setting where meaningful communication takes center stage.

4.3.2 CLT in Korea

Unlike the above mentioned countries, South Korea is situated on a peninsula cut off from the rest of the world by the West (Yellow) Sea, the South (East China) Sea, the East Sea (Sea of

Japan) and the Demilitarized Zone bordering the two Koreas. Many South Koreans have never left the country, and have had little exposure to any culture other than their own. According to Underwood; [Koreans have] “no experience of diversity” [and] “no openness to difference..” (1998:91) Furthermore, Korean university students study English mainly because it’s a basic requirement by the Korean board of education, and they display very little enthusiasm to learn English, making it an overwhelming task for the L2 teacher to persuade them to take part in meaningful L2 conversation. The author teaches Basic English Conversation classes, in a Korean university near Cheonan City, to freshmen possessing very low oral English skills. Moreover, he needs to break the students’ Confucian habit of staying quiet in the classroom if he is to facilitate meaningful L2 language conversation.

4.4 SLT should precede CLT

SLT, introduced in section 4.3, has positive effects on getting the students to become vocal and enthusiastic in practicing English verbally.

Pitman describes SLT as follows:

[The]...principal classroom activity [of SLT] in the teaching of English structure [is] the oral practice of structures. This oral practice of controlled sentence patterns should be given in situations designed to give the greatest amount of practice in English speech to the pupil. (Pitman in Richards & Rodgers 2004:40)

SLT gets students to repeat sentence structures within a word substitution framework. This method is implemented by the author, with the aid of information gap exercises, reading activities, some oral repetition, listening activities and some writing activities just to name a few. It is essential to build the Korean students' confidence in vocalizing the L2 before they can adopt a freer style.

4.5 An Ineffective Method

The Grammar Translation Method is ineffective in facilitating meaningful L2 conversation between the Korean students, since they enter university with a very limited ability to converse in English even though they had been learning it in the context of the GTM, (Richards and Rodgers) "in modified form" (2004:6), for many years at both high school and grade school levels. GTM teaches students the grammatical aspect of the L2, but it is unproductive in compelling students to communicate verbally. Students who have been taught L2 by the GTM are generally good at reading and writing, but not at speaking. The method is perhaps ineffective in building verbal skills as it focuses on the sentence in the translation process. Richards and Rodgers state:

'Much of the lesson is devoted to translating into and out of the target language, and it is this focus on the sentence that is a distinctive feature of the method' (Richards & Rodgers, 2004:6)

Plausibly the method's other failure is that it relies heavily on redundant memorization of tedious grammar rules. The author also found GTM ineffective in Hungary where he was expected to teach English using GTM for 3 years. His Hungarian students showed no real advancements in their L2 oral communication abilities. GTM is best used for learning dead languages requiring no meaningful verbal communication. GMT was originally intended to teach scholars in reading Latin texts. The Korean classroom setting focuses predominantly on the teacher rather than the student, and GTM is most preferred by the teachers since (Richards & Rodgers) "it makes few demands on teachers' (2004:6) and (Brown) 'it requires few specialized skills on the part of the teacher" (1994:53).

4.6 Implementation of CLT into the Author's LPD L2 Classroom

Many aspects of the Direct Method is used by the author majority of the time since he speaks very little Korean and lectures are predominantly held in English, and a large majority of the communication between the teacher and students are carried out in the L2. He starts out with Audiolingualism, moving on to SLT to get the students comfortable with becoming vocal, pursuing the use of SLT for the first half of the first semester. Once the students are ready to become more independent and vocal, CLT can then be effectively introduced. Generally, by this time the students are ready for some free talking and unstructured dialogue in a meaningful context. Language acquisition to (Wilkins in

Richards & Rodgers) “understand and express” (2004:154) the L2 can actually begin. By building students’ abilities through a system of scaffolding, the author was able to enhance his student’s verbal communicational skills from having no confidence in vocalizing the L2 to a level where they are able to converse in the L2 for 40 minutes non stop. This progression in the students’ oral abilities is achieved within the time span of just one semester.

Summary

The average Korean student has been taught most subjects at all levels in a large power distance classroom setting which is teacher centered and has been deeply influenced by centuries of Confucian philosophy. It is the responsibility of the L2 teacher to better understand Korean culture and its origins so he/she can successfully adapt his/her methodology to the L2 language classroom. If he/she is to best improve the L2 abilities of his/her students, a general understanding of Korean culture must be reached, so he/she can find ways to best suit his/her students’ language acquisition needs.

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