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Title: Role of pupil agency in a second language classroom

Year: 2019

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Sun, D. (2019). Role of pupil agency in a second language classroom. *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta*, 10(2). <https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-maaliskuu-2019/role-of-pupil-agency-in-a-second-language-classroom>



Role of pupil agency in a second language classroom

This article is about my experience as an English teacher in South Korea and in Finland and it points out the importance of teachers and researchers to listen to young language learners. To be specific, I will firstly share my professional career as an English teacher who has taught mostly in junior high schools in South Korea (the learners' age level was 11–13) for about 15 years. Then I will describe how I came to recognize the importance to delve into young learners' agency through my own teaching experience and decided to exercise my academic journey with the view on pupils as agentive sense-makers here in Finland.

Julkaistu: 13. maaliskuuta 2019 | Kirjoittanut: Dukkeum Sun

Status of English language in South Korea

For a long time English has been an essential tool of communication not only for its native speakers, but also for the increasing number of non-native speakers all over the world. It has also become an important school subject in different parts of the world (McKay, 2003) including South Korea ('Korea' from now on). Theoretically, the status of English language in Korea is a foreign language. There is only one official language in Korea, which is Korean language. In such a monolingual society, English cannot be easily heard or spoken as a colloquial mode in people's everyday lives. Nevertheless, to live up to the all-pervading effect of English as a global language, its societal impact and significance has rapidly grown. To simply put, English is mainly referred to as a gatekeeping tool to higher education in Korea.

The increasing significance of English and its important role in the society has made Korea to revise its national curriculum for English education. At the present English instruction starts already in primary school, instead of junior or higher level school. When it comes to second language learning, the idea 'the earlier the better' appears to be a common belief in Korea (Nunan, 2003).

However, the increasing significance of English has also led to a situation where the access to language education is widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots in society (Wallraff, 2000). In addition to formal educational in schools, many parents are putting a lot of

money to provide private English instruction to their children to help them to keep up with the competition. English, in reality, has even got a nickname as “a clear barometer to measure Korean parents’ socio-economic status”.

Looking into English learning and teaching in Korea

For a teacher this is visible in the huge gap between the learners’ proficiency and the motivation levels among the learners in one classroom. The learners are supposed to have identical textbooks, syllabus and exams and there are identical demands and expectations on the students’ English proficiency in the nationwide exams that are used to choose some certain students for certain universities. To be specific, there is a universal standardized grading system for the English proficiency test for the entrance system so that Korean learners have to reach one of the fixed levels to enter a university he or she wishes. On the other hand, their individual proficiency, needs and hopes for English learning are quite vary and different. To illustrate the differences, in a group (with average 30 students) of 7th graders, there is a student who has studied in an English speaking country for a long time and has almost natively like fluency. In the same classroom, another student cannot even tell some basic alphabets and has no other experience of English than the lessons he or she has had at school. It is hard to find the right difficulty level to teach the given topic. Sticking to the textbook would be too easy for the high-level students. For the low-level students challenging tasks than the textbook are impossible. In either way, it gets hard to grab their attention or interests. In terms of students’ motivation, this kind of situation often negatively influences the students’ learning activity and interest in the target language itself.

Indeed, an American student who has been studying in a Korean university to study about Korean culture and language for almost 10 years and has apparently a lot of experience with Korean students came out on a TV show and presented his objective opinion about English learning in Korea.

I see that a lot of Korean students have an enormous knowledge about English such as grammar and (mostly) academic vocabulary. Nevertheless, when they have to express their own voices and identity in English, they are barely able to put the knowledge into a realistic use. It closets itself in their brain all the time.

This quotation clearly shows the problem of English teaching in Korea. Nevertheless, the frustrating reality I faced has encouraged me to raise questions of the ways in which a teacher can help the pupils to find their voice and identities and how the teacher can make the classroom meaningful for the learners. In the following, I will try to answer these questions from my side.

An eye-opener to look into pupil agency

First of all, an honest feedback from a student of my own gave me a motivation to change the whole idea about what is an ideal classroom for the learners.

Your class is always fun. Although I have so much fun in your class, I have to say I feel I have got nothing left behind me after your class. To my life, English works only related to exams to enter a good university or to get a fair job to live up to in my future. It is something practical, so I don't want to feel too much fun or relaxed in my English class. It is good that I can get rid of my remaining stress in your class. But, after school, I have to go to a private institute to make up for what I missed at school. Can your class be both fun and meaningful?

I got a very significant pedagogical lesson from this student's comment about my classroom. It was right the moment when I realized that to motivate learners for the pure sake of motivation is not meaningful (Xiao, 2014). Funny games and cozy atmosphere are not enough for pupils to find the meaning of learning at school. Instead of this, it is important for a teacher to listen to the pupils to find out how they perceive the subject, what motivates them and in which ways are they willing to be agentic in their learning (Ortner, 1989 ; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992 ; Pickering, 2010). From this on, I have wanted to be open to the ways of who my pupils are, how they relate to the society and what they are aiming at.

After giving space for my students to answer the question of meaningfulness themselves, I have indeed seen many scenes where my own students albeit from monocultural and monolingual society have created a variety of unexpected responses and reflections based on a certain class activity or task. I have also observed that when giving the pupils the roles they can take in a group activity to define themselves they are capable of finding meaningful roles for pupils of different proficiency level and with different social skills, preferences, sentiment and emotions. To me, it has been eye-opening to understand that the top-down solutions that we as teachers often try to impose on our students do not seem to work. Instead, we should be more open-minded to our students' ideas and agency and create them the space for thinking and deciding for themselves. This includes both the goals they want to reach as well as the ways of being active and participating (Kalaja, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2016).

Starting with an academic journey with pupil agency in Finland

Since these experiences as a teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Korea, I have moved to Finland to start my doctoral studies with an idea of studying the personal meaning pupils put to their learning in the Finnish context. Although English is a foreign language both in Korea and in Finland I feel I am not able to make a fair comparison on the EFL field in Finland and Korea since the two countries have quite different but unique educational and societal backgrounds. However, I have not changed my mind about the importance of pupils' personal sense making and their own goals. In my few teaching moments here in Finland, I have been inspired by the pupils' ability to reflect and find significant answers to their questions of their language learning. Let me give you a very small and momentary example of an 8-year-old Finnish boy in one of my English classrooms here in Finland. One day, at the very last session for the semester with Finnish pupils in the English classroom, I was distributing a card with farewell message in English to each student. The boy with a very beginning level of English pointed out the message I wrote to him on his card, which said, "You studied English hard."

Teacher! Englanti ei ole kova, se on helppoa.

As a teacher I was quite impressed that he had fairly understood the meaning of adjective 'hard' in his own way. He was also able to make his mind on English learning by himself and he objected the meaning he thought I as a teacher was giving to it. Although their recommended level of the target language for the classroom was very low and the boy's presently known proficiency was also low, his meaning-making act completely made sense for him.

So far, I have shared how I decided on this journey as a teacher-researcher with a focal lens on the learner him or herself. Simply put, I would like to fill up the gap between bottom-up and top-down approaches to learning (Bakhshi & Golshan, 2016). I also would like to find an approach that is sensitive to the pupil perspective and pupil agency. Now as a doctoral student I set off for my meaning-making journey to find my learners' meaning-making journey in a language classroom.

Dukkeum Sun is a EFL teacher who is now starting her PhD in the university of Jyväskylä. She has been specialized in questions of language learning, cultural difference and pedagogy for young multilingual learners.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to my supervisor Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty for being all ears to my ideas all the time.

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Artikkeliin viittaaminen

Sun, D. (2019). Role of pupil agency in a second language classroom. *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta*, 10(2). Saatavilla: <https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-maaliskuu-2019/role-of-pupil-agency-in-a-second-language-classroom> (<https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-maaliskuu-2019/role-of-pupil-agency-in-a-second-language-classroom>)