

Expat Living



Expat living is a page dedicated to the issues that affect expats' daily lives. It is your page, where you can share stories about your life in Korea. Send story ideas to Matthew Lamers at mattlamers@heraldm.com

Why do you study English?

By Zoe Smith

Letter to the editor

A few years ago, in a provincial elementary school in Korea, an 11-year-old girl asked me, "Why do we need to learn English?" I instinctively replied, "Because it's important."

"But why is it important?" was her follow up question.

"Because you need English to get a good job," was my follow up reply.

"But why do we need English to get a good job?"

Her persistent challenge as to why it was necessary for her entire generation to learn English — in front of some twenty other classmates who all had their eyes locked on me as this was the question they had been yearning to know the answer to, but had never dared asked — left me feeling insecure.

How was it that as an English teacher, I couldn't even convince myself of my own reasoning?

I tried to pass off the idea that if you didn't do well at English, you would be stuck in jobs such as cleaning and bus driving. While I said that there was nothing wrong in being a cleaner, I felt that my bright students — who also happened to be lousy at cleaning up the classroom — would surely not wish such a fate upon themselves. One student then astutely told me that his father was a surgeon, had never studied abroad, and didn't know of any occasion that his father had to use English, since this was a rural town, and contact with expats was scarce.

I moved on to teaching university students in the bright lights of cosmopolitan Seoul, quietly assuming that these students were learning English because they wanted to get a good job, and thus the discussion of the old question would never rear its head.

Yet, there always remained an uneasy feeling among myself and other colleagues concerning students who quit our classes because our conversational approach prescribed by modern EFL teaching practice wasn't providing the material that university students needed to pass the essential English exam, TOEIC. And therein lays a frustration which many English teachers face.

As a teacher, we want to stimulate conversational discussion and turn English into a communication medium that is easy and comfortable to use. As a student in Korea, the idea of learning English is still very much oriented toward the goal of passing an English exam. The knowledge and strategies for taking an English exam are quite different from being able

to discuss feelings, for example. If the skills needed to pass an English exam are working, there is often a reluctance to learn English for any purpose beyond that.

Learning English for English's sake is still quite rare in Korea. Despite the huge expense of private tuition and the construction of English villages, if the results are not reflected in increased English exam scores, as seems to be apparent in Korea's still relatively low international ranking in TOEIC and TOEFL scores, there is still a huge shadow of doubt on the meaning of learning English as a language of international communication.

Even if you do manage to get a good TOEIC score and a good job as a result, what sort of frequency is the average Korean worker expected to use English on a day-to-day basis?

Unless an employee is directly involved in international business, has a job that is pivotal on internet research, or is working in a sector such as an English teacher or editing an English journal, the need to know English is arguably not essential for the majority of the population.

Unlike other Asian nations who had a high degree of British colonial influence, English has not been the pivotal driving force behind Korea's economic development. English has never played a key role in Korean politics. There have been incursions on national identity throughout Korea's past, but at present, with booming entertainment and tourist industries, Korean identity and Korean language have never been stronger.

Outsiders love Korea for what it is. Sure, it would be nice to be able to converse with more Koreans passing in the street, but I do not wish that to come at a cost of forced education, putting undue pressure on children who don't really want to learn English.

It might be sensible among this headlong rush to stop and think for a moment as to who exactly is benefiting from this sudden desire to push English as a second language. And we have to consider what is being sacrificed to achieve it.

This is not to debate the need for English altogether, but it is a question that someone, somewhere, has forgotten to come up with an adequate answer for.

Zoe is currently undertaking an MA in applied linguistics in the United Kingdom. He can be reached at zohsan75@hotmail.com — Ed.



DAVID SMEATON'S PHOTO CHALLENGE — Open to all entries — This photo, taken last weekend, prompted a life lesson. Sometimes we just need to see the world in a different light or angle. Slow down, take your time; things will be clearer for it. Ryan Chappell (ryanchappell.com)

Video in the classroom: Not as easy as it sounds

Sean Smith on EFL

Teachers in all subject areas use video because we are primarily visual learners. There are good and not-so-good ways to incorporate video into the language-learning classroom.

Here, I will focus on the use of television and movies, as opposed to music videos or YouTube videos — due to the extended context provided by these media and their popularity with students and teachers.

Browsing various internet forums, I have read that many teachers use video by inserting a DVD in the player, hitting play and watching the entire movie or TV episode in one sitting, followed by a few discussion questions. I can only wonder what, if any, learning opportunity is provided with that method that the students could not do by themselves at home.

The problem with this method, and I speak from experience, is that many students will lose focus or even fall asleep during the video, thus not understanding everything (even with the subtitles), and will not be able to answer discussion questions because they haven't gotten the storyline.

Watching television and movies without relying on subtitles is a goal that many language learners have, but most

increase readability. I also watch the scenes in question while reading the transcripts because there are often errors because they are produced by fans, not professionals. Doing so is much more efficient than transcribing everything myself.

Editing the script reduces the size of handouts and further focuses students' attention on specific areas which the teacher has chosen. These may be related to material covered earlier in the course, interesting topics, cultural observations and idioms or colloquial language.

My handouts typically run six to eight pages, with each two-page spread used to define the viewing time before discussion. I usually highlight several difficult words, phrases, or idioms in a box with definitions, while, on the second page, there will be a list of questions related to the scenes we just watched.

This approach keeps students focused, as there are regular breaks in viewing, and students are aware that they will be required to discuss what they are watching. They also have the script and questions for the scenes we view, allowing them to follow along even if their listening skills are not quite up to par. As a further aid in this area, I also recommend watch-

ing video with English subtitles, rather than no subtitles. Additionally, by preparing video that is interesting to the students — as well as questions that are personalized — students will be more inclined to actively participate. A final benefit of not showing complete episodes in the classroom is that students may be motivated to finish watching a show on their own, outside of class.

Movies can also be structured in this same way. I personally recommend using a TV series, since students who watch entire seasons on their own will gain the benefit of extended context that isn't available with movies.

The process is quite long for planning a lesson around video. It takes me about 10 hours to prepare one episode, but it's well worth it. A well-planned video lesson can be reused for many semesters. The benefit only increases when you can use it with different sections of the same class.

I have uploaded several sample lessons to my blog that can be downloaded in PDF and MS Publisher formats.

To contact Sean or comment on this column, visit his website: eflgeek.com — Ed.

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In focus — manual focusing

By David Smeaton

I'm trying to teach myself how to photograph using manual focus, but I'm finding it quite difficult. What can I do to improve my manual focusing skills? Will, Sokcho

These days, thanks to auto focus, manual focusing is less necessary and much harder. One of the problems is that cameras are no longer designed to make the most of manual focusing.

The fatal flaw in DSLR cameras is the lack of a focusing screen. Older SLR cameras, especially ones which only had manual focus, use a special screen mounted into the viewfinder. The screen splits the image so that you can tell whether the photo is in perfect focus or not. My Nikon D200 doesn't have a focusing screen, and I'm not sure if I could even buy one to fit. However, my 25 year old Leica does have a focusing screen. It's a manual focus camera and obtaining perfect focus is easy.

If you can't find a focusing screen, there are other ways to improve your manual focus. A good way is to pre-focus. If you know where your target will be (such as a model in a studio) then you can focus manually and lock the focus. Then all of your shots will be perfect. If you can be certain that the distance will remain the same, you could also use auto focus, then when it finds the exact distance, lock the focus.

If shooting landscapes, the best method is to use an infinite focal depth. Most cameras are only able to focus to about 10 meters — beyond that is effectively infinity. Many lenses have distance marks and the far right mark should be an infinity symbol. Set your camera to infinity and landscapes will look great.

While on the topic of distance marks, most photographers don't make full use of these any more. Distance marks are useful in most situations. If you can guess the distance or measure it accurately, then the camera's distance marks will be very helpful for setting your focus.

Also keep in mind that aperture does play a part regarding focus. Using large apertures (such as f2.8) provides a very narrow depth of field and focus. However, small apertures (f18 or f22) have a much wider depth of field. While your focus still needs to be accurate, using a smaller aperture, even an f8, may be sufficient and can help retain your focus, especially when the subject is moving.

Most importantly, you need to practice focusing manually. Without regular practice, the skills and speed don't develop.

The need for manual focus definitely hasn't disappeared; great macro photographers still rely on their focusing skills get perfect shots. Manual focus is also useful for portraits. If the camera focuses on the nose, then the eyes may look soft or out of focus.

Action photographers use manual focus a lot too. Often the subject is moving too fast for the camera to focus on. The photographer picks a point in the frame that will be perfect, locks the focus, and shoots manually.

Finally, in low light, or when shooting through distracting foreground objects (such as fences or cages) the auto focus may be fooled or not work at all. Here too, manual focus is the key to success. Moments like this definitely make manual focusing worth the effort to learn and practice.

Happy shooting.

Send David a message at davidsmeaton@gmail.com or visit his website at davidsmeaton.com. If you want to be a part of the weekly Photo Challenge, join the "Seoul Photo Club" group at flickr.com/groups/seoulphotoclub/. — Ed.



wants to hear from you

Share stories of your life abroad with all of Korea. Send in photos of your weekend excursions for publication. Participate in Photo Challenge, our weekly photo competition. Or just write a letter telling a personal anecdote you'd like to share. Letters should be shorter than 400 words, photos larger than 500 kb and article submissions under 1,000 words. Please e-mail Matt at mattlamers@heraldm.com — Ed.

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