

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Using Korean in Group Work Tasks

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Currently in South Korea there is a good deal of discussion about the importance of teaching English through English. This has led to the teaching English through English (TETE) movement, which Kim (2002) defines as “speaking and using English as often as you possibly can, for example, when organizing teaching activities or chatting to students socially. It means establishing English as the main language of communication between students and instructors” (p. 132).

At the same time, due to the popularity of Communicative Language Teaching, teachers are encouraged to use group work on a regular basis in their English classes. This has resulted in many teachers insisting that their students use only English in completing group tasks. However, often teachers find that students tend to use a good deal of Korean once they are in groups. Hence, teachers continually encourage students to use only English in their groups, and in some cases actually penalize students for using Korean.

The pervasiveness of this situation warrants a close look at the issue of using Korean in classroom group work. To begin, it is important to point out that it is very unnatural for individuals to communicate in a second language when they share a mother tongue. Even very fluent Korean speakers of English will use Korean with one another. Thus, it is not surprising that students tend to use Korean with one another when put in groups.

The questions is: Is it wise for teachers to ban the use of Korean altogether in group work and if not, under what circumstances might the use of Korean be warranted? One of the primary reasons for having students use English in groups is to give them an opportunity to use English to negotiate meaning. However, if students do not have the necessary structural and lexical knowledge to communicate what they wish to say in English, it's impossible for them to successfully communicate in English. This suggests that with less proficient students using only English in groups is not likely to be successful. Does this mean then that group work is not feasible with low-level students or that there is not a place for the use of English in group work with lower level students?

I would argue that group work can be successfully used with less proficient students, using English in limited ways. Clearly all productive group work should have a clear outcome in which there is some type of required final product that students are supposed to complete. For example, a group task could require students to write a short dialogue, perhaps exemplifying the use of particular lexical phrases, or they could be asked to develop a short paragraph based on a model they are given. In completing such tasks, students could be told that they may use Korean to plan the final product with one another but ultimately the final product must be in English. Letting students plan the final product in Korean allows students to communicate with one another about aspects of English grammar and vocabulary as they seek to develop an accurate final product. In this way, group members share their knowledge about English and effectively teach one another what they know about English.

In short, Korean can be used productively in group work to promote English learning, even with less proficient students. The problem is to determine under what circumstances the use of Korean warranted. Listed below are some circumstances:

- To clarify the teachers' instructions for a task
- To explain difficult vocabulary items to one another
- To explain grammatical rules to one another
- To plan how to complete a task

There are, of course, other circumstances when the use of Korean is clearly not productive as, for example, chatting about social topics not related to the task. In such cases, teachers should certainly intervene and insist that students get back on task, using as much English as possible. Ultimately it is imperative that all teachers carefully reflect on when Korean can and should be used in classroom group work and to make these guidelines clear to their language learners.

References

Kim, S. Y. (2002) Teachers' perception about teaching English through English. *English Teaching*. 57(1), 131-148.

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