

## A Life Story of a Male Korean Language Learner

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*This is a record in second language learning based on the life story interviews that I conducted with Jyun Bang from February 28, 2008 to March 20, 2008 in the room 305 of Stapleton Library at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is from South Korea, pursuing his Ph. D in TESOL at IUP. He has been in the U.S. for about three years and six months. He had been an English teacher for eight years at a foreign language university and a private institute in Korea. He had studied and received his Master's degree at Ball State University in Indiana before he came to IUP. I met him in the class American English Grammar in fall 2008, which was my first semester at IUP graduate school. He was the most active learner out of five Asian students.*

*I decided to interview him about his second language learning to track what kind of difficulties Korean people may encounter to acquire English. Korean and Japanese have the same basic word order, which is subject-object-verb, so I wanted to compare his learning experience with my own. Additionally, he plays a good role model as both a non-native speaker and a non-native speaking teacher. I felt honored to do interviews about his second language because it gives all L2 learners tips on how to be successful in second language acquisition.*

### **Early Stage of My English learning**

Today children start to learn English at the third grade of elementary school in Korea, however, at that time we started to learn English at seventh grade of middle school. Of course the curriculum was totally different from now emphasizing the importance of grammar and reading. In addition, we did not have a variety of technology equipment in classrooms. You

might picture an English teacher holding a CD player and visual aids, or teaching English at a language lab with computers and audio equipment. In contrast, it was about twenty five years ago my English teacher brought a cassette player, a textbook, and a couple of pieces of chalk to class. We did not have CD players or DVD players either. In my reading class, the teacher read the textbook and then students repeated after him. Next the teacher read comprehension questions, and students answered the questions. We also practiced pronunciations of new vocabulary, but we never had experiences with native speaking teachers, so I could not compare them with non-native speaking teachers. Now I reflect on my classes at middle school and I think the teacher had difficulty in pronouncing English words and producing intonations. We never used English in the classroom, except when we read passages after the teacher and answered comprehension questions.

Listening to English pop songs was the only way to learn English outside the classroom. The famous singer was Michael Jackson then. I was listening to Michael Jackson's most famous album, which was "Thriller." When I first listened to his song, I felt it was new and exciting. I listened to his album over one hundred times because I wanted to figure out what he was singing. I think I had motivation to learn English through his music as my student who started to learn Japanese because she was interested in Japanese cartoons.

CDs were not available then. We could get only cassettes and LPs, which were plastic things and used to record for long playing. Today we can get lyrics easily from the internet or CD cases, but music companies did not offer lyrics for buyers at that time. How did I understand his songs without lyrics? I just dictated as much as I could catch just by listening because it was the only way to get lyrics, but I think this is a kind of practice for listening and writing in English. What if I encounter unfamiliar words? I asked my friends or looked them up in a dictionary. However, we found slang in his songs that we could not look up in the dictionary.

My early stage of English learning was focused on vocabulary, grammar, and reading, so I had no communication skills in English. However, I liked to learn more vocabulary and get high scores on exams. Michael Jackson motivated me to learn English at that time.

### **Middle Stage of My English Learning**

During high school, the most difficult for me regarding four skills was reading. Since we are using different word order from English, I always had to interpret from the end of English sentences. First, I translated subject, and then I looked for objects and compliments. Finally, I came to verbs to fully understand English sentences. I did not have any problems with alphabets, but reading and interpreting were totally new thinking process for me then.

When I was in high school, I met one of my favorite English teachers. He was sort of a pioneer of Chomsky's grammar. I heard that he participated in conferences about linguistics to learn Chomsky's grammar. Some of you must be surprised to hear this because his theories are difficult and usually taught at a college level. Moreover, if you are studying linguistics or TESOL, you must know him. Noam Chomsky is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and a famous linguist, philosopher, and activist. He created a generative grammar. This teacher taught us about tree diagrams in his grammar class. We actually drew trees to see grammar components graphically. If I had not met him at high school, I would not be here in the U.S. right now.

At first, I thought "what is this?" because it was difficult, but at the same time it was challenging and attracted me. The traditional grammar was easy because we just had to find where subjects, verbs, and objects were, but it was hard to draw tree diagrams. I am not sure how my other classmates felt at that time, however, I felt I wanted to learn more about Chomsky's grammar. I got more interested in grammar at this moment.

Additionally, I competed with my friends to see who could memorize more vocabulary. We bought index cards and wrote vocabulary on them. One person flipped an index card and asked what a word means in Korean, and the rest of us answered as fast as we could. We enjoyed playing this game after school.

Most surprisingly, I found out that we finished thirty grammar books in three years when I counted after I graduated. Additionally, we had three teachers to teach grammar in each class, and we were required to take nine courses in a year because English was the most significant subject to pass the college entrance exam. The college entrance exam had nine subjects with the total score of three hundred. The score of English itself was 80. It reveals how hard I had to study English because I wanted to major in English linguistics. I laugh about how much money I could get back by selling my thirty high school grammar books at that time.

As you can see, my English classes had an emphasis on reading, grammars and vocabulary because our goal was to pass the college entrance exam. I had no games or activities in class, but I met my favorite teacher who taught me about Chomsky's tree diagrams. He laid the foundation for my future development. It was my privilege to meet such a wonderful teacher at high school when I was younger.

### **Late Stage of my English Learning**

Fortunately, I passed the college entrance exam in 1989, and matriculated in Foreign Language University in Korea. My major was linguistics.

I met two native speaking teachers. One of them was a male teacher whose name was Brown. He was only thirty five years old or so and considered very young then. The other teacher was a female from the U.S. and she was an exchange student at the same time in my

college. Her husband was a journalist, so she came to Korea with him and took a couple of courses during one semester. She was an excellent teacher and I had so much fun with her.

She used pop songs in her conversation class and we visited her office twice a week during her office hours. My friends and I sat down on the floor with her and talked about various things in English. She did not speak Korean at all at that time, so we talked only in English. In her class, we formed groups of four to five people for a singing contest and practiced songs during her office hours.

We memorized the lyrics and two people played the instruments such as the guitar and the piano. Our song was “Country Road” by the Carpenters. Isn’t that surprising that I can still sing this song? Participating in the singing contest was not mandatory or evaluated as my grade, but I practiced hard in class and during her office hours.

In her class, there were about sixty students, so it was impossible for students to work in a pair or practice face-to-face conversations with classmates. She read the conversations as a model, and we repeated after her.

My friends and I were so sad when she left for Hong Kong because of her husband’s job, but learning pop songs was a totally new experience for me.

### **Harsh Period after Graduate School**

I went to a graduate school from 1996 to 1998, and I finished M.A. linguistics in Korea, and of course I was interested in learning linguistics in the U.S. Thus, I started to prepare for Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which was required for international students to prove our English ability to study abroad. However, I gave up after I tried to prepare for it several times because I had to make a living by myself. After I finished my graduate school in Korea and until I came to the U.S. there was a ten year gap. It was

really long and harsh for me. During those ten years I taught English at the private institute for almost twelve hours and Korean at Foreign Language University for international students. In class, I used mainly Korean, and when international students could not understand what I said, I explained in English.

Once I was going to give up, but I had been longing to study abroad for ten years. I kept this goal in my mind for ten years, and I worked for ten to twelve hours a day. I think this kind of situation could happen to anyone. You want to go back to college to get a degree, but you have to work hard and save enough money for it.

Even though I worked for approximately twelve hours a day, I put enough effort into it to keep on improving my English ability. First, I read passages aloud about science and American history voluntarily in my reading class for TOEFL. Then, I was in charge of listening and writing classes. Furthermore, I taught very basic conversation such as “hi how are you?” I was teaching a variety of aspects of English, so I was teaching but learning at the same time, and this is the way I could continue to study English even after I graduated from my graduate school. Second, I checked the CNN website during my breaks twice a day. I was doing this between my classes and during lunch time, and when I got back home I turned on CNN on TV. Even while I was sleeping, I had my TV on CNN channel so that I could listen to more English. I really wanted to practice my listening.

Moreover, I was commuting from my house to my work place by subway for an hour, so I always carried Walkman which allowed me to practice listening in English.

However, I could not practice my writing as much as listening, grammar, and reading. I bought a textbook for TOEFL essays and wrote one essay a week. This book is written for people who are preparing for TOEFL essay exam, and gives you topics to practice writing essays for TOEFL. Fortunately, I had some native speaking coworkers at my work place, so

sometimes I asked them to proofread my essays. However, I tried not to ask so often. This feeling might come from Korean culture, that asking too much is not considered good. Thus, I hesitated to ask them even though we were coworkers because I knew that they were also busy and wanted to enjoy their lives in Korea. Moreover, I was revising my students' essays as a teacher, so having my essays checked by my coworkers gave me a strange feeling because we were in the same position as English teachers.

However, I met a good friend, Thomas, from the U.S. at the university where I was working. It was 1997, and he was an excellent guy. One day he invited me to play the computer game, Starcraft, which was the prequel to Warcraft. Interestingly, we did not teach Korean or English to each other, and I did not consider him a helper to improving my English. I think people would teach languages to each other in this kind of case. We had more like an ordinary friendship; we enjoyed chatting. He liked to watch Star Wars, so I asked him "Why do American people love Star Wars?" and he asked me back "Why Korean people love 'Chun hyang jeon?'" which was a traditional Korean folk story about romance that all Korean people know. We were joking around with each other like this. I believe that our friendship went beyond the relationship of the native and non-native speakers.

After a while, Thomas moved to the northern part of Korea because he got a new job at a high ranked private high school where teachers teach all subjects in English. Nowadays this kind of school is getting hard to enter. Some students who graduate from this kind of school go to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford.

### **Military Service of Two and a Half Years**

In Korea, men have to serve in the military for two and a half years. Some people decided to join the military as soon as they entered college. Others stopped studying in the middle, and went into the military. It was in 1993 that I went to the military service. I was a

junior in college. I was 23 at the moment. How did I continue to study English in the military? I never could study in the military because I had training. Even when I did not have training, I had to work. As a result, I gradually lost the habit of studying. My friend said that “military service destroyed my brain because his English level was decreased during the military service in Taiwan.” I agree with this. Additionally, I did not use English in the military, so I did not forget English, but I lost some vocabulary, grammar, listening and speaking ability in two years in the military.

However, I had a special training period with American soldiers during the two years. They used English during this training. Moreover, I met an African American soldier because both Korean and American militaries were located near each other. I spoke to him, saying “Hi how are you?” and “Where are you from?” I uttered only two sentences, but this was the only time that I spoke English. In 1994, I finished my military service, and I went to a graduate school in Korea.

### **Studying Abroad to the U.S. and Culture Shock**

When I first came to the U.S., I was matriculated at Ball State University in Indiana in fall 2005. I wanted to teach at a university as a professor. I was both nervous and excited. First, I was surprised to hear students called their professors by their first names without titles. I was confused because I did not know what to call my professors because Korean culture is age-oriented. Additionally, since I was a graduate student, I met some classmates who were older than me. However, I did not even know what to call them. I was wondering if I should call them Mr. and their last names, but I thought it would sound strange because we were classmates. Finally, I could call them by their first names after a while.

Moreover, I had a culture shock concerning appropriate greetings. In Korea, we bow or shake hands as a greeting. If you are younger than the other person, you have to bow, and

you cannot propose to shake hands with older people. When older people propose to shake hands, you can accept it. On the contrary, in the U.S. a female classmate gave me a hug when we met on campus. I was surprised and later I knew that it was the way to greet.

The lecture style in the U.S. was also a culture shock for me. In Korea, teachers stand before a blackboard and give lectures. It is called teacher-centered. Teachers always led and gave students all the information and knowledge, but it is totally different in the U.S. We students discuss the information and knowledge from textbooks. When I was in Korea, I never had discussions. Even when I ask a question, I had to think many times if my question was right and something important. On the contrary, I thought that students did not care whether questions were right, and worth asking. I felt American students tended to express their experiences. In the U.S. this is perfectly acceptable, but it is not in Korea.

I think I really improved my speaking and writing during my two years at Ball State University. At first, I had difficulty communicating with my classmates because of my English proficiency at that time. One time my professor assigned a different project to each group, but in order to finish this project, we had to discuss in a group. It was hard for me to discuss in a group. First, I was not familiar with the project, and I was unable to speak English fluently like other classmates. I actually had a lot of ideas in my mind, but I could not express them in English. However, the biggest reason that I could not contribute to this group project was I had not built a good relationship with my American classmates at that time. I felt like there was a barrier between them and me.

However, time went by, and I started to understand what my professors and classmates were saying in class as two semesters passed. Around this time, I realized that I improved my English.

Concerning my reading skills, I read many articles to prepare for my classes. I could interpret sentences; however, I could not get the point of the articles at the first time because the writing style in Korean and English is totally different. As I read more articles in English and started to become familiar with the writing style, I was able to get the point easier.

I improved my speaking ability by having two conversation partners. I had one male and one female conversation partner. They were volunteers and we met three times a week, one hour each time. I selected one article to discuss. I remember we discussed American cultures. I remember that I asked about St. Patrick's Day which is for immigrants from Ireland and it has passed recently in March. People wear something green on that day. Moreover, we talked about American holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving. I was invited to a Thanksgiving dinner at an American family's house that year. I had turkey with cranberry sauce for the first time in my whole life because we do not eat turkey much in Korea.

However, when I entered my college in Korea, I did not have enough speaking abilities. At that time I was not used to communicating in English at all. One day my teacher asked me "Can you go to find a paper towel?" At that time I did not know what the paper towel was, but I could not ask my teacher what it was either because I could not speak anything with native speakers at that time. I went to look for it anyway. I walked around in the building and campus, and I asked everybody whom I met in Korean. However, they did not know what the paper towel was either. Finally, I went to the English department. I met one of the assistants, so I asked her if she knew what the paper towel was. She said "I think this is the paper towel." I got it and ran back to the classroom. I gave it to my native speaking teacher. At that time I was twenty one years old, and it was my first experience that I really talked to a native speaker of English in person. I will not forget this word forever.

## Memories

My good memory was participating in the singing contest at college. On the contrary, my bad memories are related to the phone. When I arrived at the U.S., I had called the office to talk about my transcript. Phoning is more convenient because I do not have to go to see people directly, and I can save time for my study. However, I could not understand what the man said on the phone, so I had to go to the office to talk to him. When I got to the office, I asked a woman to issue my transcript. I understood what she said, but she could not understand what I said. I was not familiar with the words used at the office at the beginning. I was familiar with only academic terminology that I studied. I had to go back and forth until I found somebody who could understand what I said. When I talked to the woman face to face, I could understand what she said better by watching her lip movements, gestures, and facial expressions. Finally, I received my academic transcript. This is the normal case for international students until we get used to the life in the U.S. This experience improved my negotiation skills in a daily life.

Moreover, I called Verizon to apply for the Internet, but I had a Hispanic operator. She spoke English fluently, but we sometimes misunderstood because of our own accents. She asked me “May I have your name?” and I answered “My name is Jyun.” She heard my name as “Jyuan” not “Jyun.” I guess Jyuan sounds more like Spanish. I told her my name with spelling ten times, but my name was still “Jyuan” on the bill that I got one month later. Then, I called Verizon again to ask them to correct my name. I had a male Hispanic operator this time. I could tell this from his accent. I said “My name is ‘Jyun’ not ‘Jyuan,’ so could you correct my name?” He said “I got it,” but one month later my name on the bill was still “Jyuan.” This is the difficulty of communicating on the phone.

I had bad memories with communicating with people on the phone, but through these experiences I learned more vocabulary that I had never learned in textbooks and articles.

These experiences were also valuable for me.

### **Learning at Wal-Mart**

One day I went to Wal-Mart to buy rice, but I could not find where they have rice. I asked the lady where they have “lice” not “rice.” We Korean people sometimes mix up /r/ sound with /l/ sound because we do not have /r/ sound in Korean. I heard that Japanese people also have difficulty pronouncing and distinguishing /r/ and /l/. I remember she stared at me “Why is this guy looking for lice at Wal-Mart?” at first. I repeated “lice” several times, but I noticed that I had to say “rice” with /r/ sound. Finally, she understood what I wanted and I could buy rice.

Another day, I went to Wal-Mart to buy a nail clipper, but I did not know what it was called in English. I asked “Do you have cutters to cut your nails?” The clerk figured out what I wanted and told me about the location. Then, I had another problem. I think she said “Walk down this aisle and it is on aisle four.” I was confused because I could not catch all what she said.” I just pretended that I understood because I was not courageous to ask again at that time. I had a pride as an English teacher, so I felt frustrated to find myself unable to understand native speakers at that moment. It took a while for me to find a small nail clipper. However, I learned the word nail clipper through this experience. I realized that I knew a lot of academic words about my major, but I did not know many words used in daily life since I started to live in the U.S.

## **Turning Point of My Life**

My turning point was to decide to study abroad to the U.S. I met my favorite professor who taught grammar at graduate school in Korea and has been to the U.S. She has been my role model as both L2 learner and the teacher since then. She is knowledgeable about grammar, but she still studies every day. Although she is a teacher, she continues to learn. I respect her because she taught me teaching is a life long process, and we teachers always need to learn with students. She inspired my later life because I decided to study abroad after I met her.

Finally my dream had come true and I came to the U.S. However, I was shocked because I was unable to understand what professors were saying in class. I was proud of myself as a teacher, and I thought I was an expert in English. It was also a turning point for me because I remembered what it was like to be a student again. I decided to use a voice recorder to record the lectures. I asked the professors for permission to record their lectures. When I got home, I reviewed lectures one or two times. Surprisingly, I had a friend who videotaped lectures and I think this is more efficient than audio taping because you can actually see professor's lip movements, gestures and facial expressions that help L2 speakers to understand better. He was carrying a video camera. I was really eager to study, and I think this is a tip for international students to be successful in the U.S. I have never seen people audio taping at IUP, but I am still using my voice recorder. I am recording the class Second Language Acquisition because it is a primary course for TESOL majors.

I also visited my professors' office. In the first year, I asked them about questions regarding my personal life, but after I settled down, I started to ask questions about my major. If I had a question about my reading assignments or papers, I always went to talk to my professors. This is the best way to solve problems with schoolwork.

## **Language Teaching through Class Observations**

I sometimes participated in my classmates' classes and a language center for community people in Indiana to observe what the teacher and students did in the classroom. I observed teacher-student interactions, responses and reactions, and I found the topic on my dissertation. I met professors who are interested in other topics through observations and talking to them inspires me and gain more knowledge about second language teaching. Through observations, I learned that the relationship with people is the key factor to improve English because we are using language to communicate with each other.

## **Early English Learning**

If I could go back to the past, I would change the situation in which I learned English. I started my English learning at middle school, but I could not meet any native speaking teachers at that time. Today third graders start to learn English in Korea. I think this is the perfect time to learn L2 because they already can speak their L1 fluently. Younger learners can pick up native-like pronunciations. When we started to learn English at middle school, we have already developed our identity as a non-native speaker. Thus, we would feel strange to communicate with classmates in L2 because we built relationships in our L1.

Additionally, I could not learn speaking and writing at middle school then because the curriculum valued speaking and writing less than reading and grammar. I want to communicate with people in English because I believe it is better way to master language. I value the relationships with people in language learning because developing new relationships by communicating accelerate L2 acquisition. We have a desire to use language to communicate both in L1 and L2.

When I was in Korea, I thought reading skills are more important, but since I came to the U.S., I changed my mind. Speaking and writing skills are more important because I learned the importance of communications by experiencing difficulty and learning from my mistakes. I also have to write my 300 page dissertation for Ph.D. Writing dissertations are really complicated process, but I did not learn writing at all in Korea. I started to learn writing since I came to the U.S. so it is still difficult for me.

Even now they do not teach writing at middle school in Korea although the government changed the curriculum and teachers are supposed to teach writing. They do not value the importance of writing at middle school probably it is because of the entrance exam, which is the biggest goal for English learning. The entrance exams do not require writing an essay. Some higher ranked universities such as Seoul University requires students to write essays on the entrance exam, but they usually start to learn writing in a short period after they submit application forms to colleges and until they enter the college. Students go to a private institute to learn writing in English because they have only two months to practice writing. It is almost impossible to practice writing essays for the entrance exam by yourself at home.

### **Current Language Learning**

Now I do not have many problems in my daily life when I communicate with people in English since I am used to living in the U.S. I realized that I was also learning a lot through communicating with people outside the school. Another problem that I had was my writing skills since I could not have enough practice in Korea. In fact, I practice writing by summarizing articles. People are surprised to see many pieces of paper of my note for articles on my desk. I write summaries on them and rearrange them after I finish reading. It helps me to organize ideas and prepare for classes by thinking about questions to ask. Thus, I can be an

active student in class. I am trying to break the generalization that Asian students keep quiet in class.

My future goal is to become a professor in Korea, so I am working hard on my dissertation and I also attend conferences for my professional development. I just participated in a conference in NY.

### **Conclusion**

My interviewee, Jyun Bang, told me a unique life story of his second language learning. He learned English in a totally different setting with no technology and communications. He learned about tree diagrams of Chomsky's grammar at high school, served in the military for two and a half years at college, and he had been waiting to study abroad for ten years, saving money for the American graduate school. However, he never gave up learning English in his whole life. He is the only one who is recording lectures at IUP even after he received his Master's in the U.S. His life story includes many tips on how to be successful as an international student. Additionally, I learned that the English curriculum does not value writing in Korea. Thus, it will be interesting to investigate and compare the writing skills of Korean people and Japanese people in the future.