

Connecting Learning to Other, More Intrinsically Motivating Tasks

Dr. Boyoung Lee, ELT Specialist

If you haven't yet heard of Boyoung Lee, you haven't been involved in ELT in Korea for very long. She's an ELT expert: a teacher, a teacher trainer, an ELT media instructor, a materials developer, a scholar, a researcher, a businessperson... the list goes on... and a very nice person to interview. Dr. Lee is a featured speaker at the KOTESOL International Conference this April, and here is that interview. — Ed.

KOTESOL: Thank you for making the time for this interview in what I am sure is a busy schedule. It is very much appreciated. To begin with, your name – Boyoung Lee – is pretty much a household name for anyone associated with English learning in Korea, but could you tell us how you became so interested in English and what carried that interest into a career in the field of English language teaching?

Boyoung Lee: My biggest inspirations were my mother and those friends from middle school who encouraged me to become an English teacher. My mother had the clearest understanding about the need for English learning based on her own learning experience in North Carolina back in the 1950s, where she was sent by then-president Syngman Rhee to further her studies in aeronautics. Also, she was the one who allowed me to realize the importance of using dictionaries and how language skills can be utilized to achieve your goal when she helped me write a fan letter to Donny Osmond when I was 10. Also, it was some of my friends whom I used to help with their English who told me that I had the potential to become an efficient English teacher.

KOTESOL: You have taught English in almost all scenarios: in the classroom, over the radio, on television, virtually, etc. Which do you find the most appealing? The most difficult? The most effective?

Boyoung Lee: Other than the in-person class where dynamic interaction occurs, I would say that teaching opportunities on media each have their own unique and impeccable merits that could hardly be found elsewhere. The effect seems to be so wide-reaching and long-lasting

that, throughout my thirty-some-year career, I've been constantly approached by complete strangers claiming how their lives have been affected by their English learning experiences through my shows. Those are such overwhelming and humbling moments for me, I must say. The range of the audience that my teaching "reaches out to and touches" has been much wider than I could



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possibly have imagined, and the sense of reward has been beyond description. I've been quite blessed career-wise to have chances to practice English education in various settings and, more importantly, to be able to learn quite a bit as an EFL learner myself.

KOTESOL: At the Korea TESOL International Conference in April, you will be giving a featured session titled

“Collaborating in the Context of Korean EFL.” Would you give us a sneak preview as to the content of this session?

Boyoung Lee: By “collaboration” in my presentation, I would like to focus more on connecting English learning to other more intrinsically motivating tasks. The case I plan to describe revolves around young Korean English learners who would voluntarily gather together and create an organization to share their positive learning experiences with their peers, mostly from underprivileged learning environments, as well as use their language skills for socially impactful causes, including the environment, and engaging as good world citizens. In doing so, they devised diverse ways to “collaborate” with different sectors through English, and as a result, their endeavor was rewarded with a huge sense of pride and responsibility. Surprisingly, adults from different organizations and even authorities who came to offer assistance to these students also collaborated.

I chose to discuss this case because it strengthens my belief that English education in Korea should allow more room for the students to explore opportunities on their own and expand themselves in various ways.

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KOTESOL: Collaborative teaching, also called co-teaching and team teaching, has been promoted by the government through programs such as EPIK. Though effective in theory, why do you think it has been producing quite mixed results, especially when an L1-English teacher is paired with an L1-Korean teacher of English?

Boyoung Lee: Among other things, I believe far more and bigger success stories could be yielded if Korean and native-speaker teachers could communicate more based on mutual understanding in terms of their different languages and cultures. Second, I wish Korean English teachers could have more positive learning experiences themselves, especially concerning communicative competence. After all, it’s all about communication.

KOTESOL: Many years ago when I first taught at the tertiary level, co-authored research papers were almost unheard of in Korea – except possibly for a faculty advisor and their graduate student sometimes doing a co-authored paper. With Korea traditionally being a collectivist society, it would seem natural that collaborative research would have been more common early on in Korea. Why do you think this was not the case?

Boyoung Lee: To that question, I wish I could answer with more substance and insight. However, I believe we’ll be able to see more active collaborative research implemented in the future, since there has been escalating awareness and a consensus building up of its necessity. Especially with IT-oriented experts, we can definitely

expect to see more collaborative research coming in the future. Information and technology have taken a major role in expanding and enriching the ELT environment for the past decade.

KOTESOL: You are always in multiple projects at the same time. What projects are you involved in at present? Are there any others that will be launching soon?

Boyoung Lee: Recently I’ve written two books, one of which is on healing souls. I am happily surprised to see it being well received. In addition to broadcasting/writing for EBS radio (equivalent to PBS in the US), currently I’m on an app development project. It has been quite a nerve-racking as well as a learning experience for me every step of the way. And there is a plan to create a set of online lectures for aspiring English teachers in the private sector.

KOTESOL: You are the CEO of MISOA. Could you describe what kind of work this company is involved in?

Boyoung Lee: I set up the company in 2013 as an ELT materials content developer. So far, we’ve made a coursebook series for elementary school children, with emphasis on helping the children with grammar and vocabulary as well as their communicative ability. Also, we’ve been providing teacher training programs to a phone English company for over seven years.

KOTESOL: If you had a magic wand that you could use to change one thing about Korea’s English education system, what would you choose to use it to change?

Boyoung Lee: I’ve always thought that the education system itself has little to be blamed for the problems that have occurred in Korean ELT; rather, it’s been the adults – teachers, administrators, and parents alike – especially when they’re equipped with less understanding about ELT, and more importantly, their own children, who wrongfully use the system. Therefore, I would like to see more “educating” seminars, or training sessions, being held for these “adults.”

KOTESOL: All right. Now, if you had two additional magic English wands, what would you use each of them to change?

Boyoung Lee: With one, I would probably have the teachers of different cultural and learning backgrounds engage in more active collaboration professionally and share with one another. With the second, I would make sure that ELT learners experience “actual” communication with people from other cultures to widen their horizons, through overseas travel, etc. My whole point is to take the pressure off the learners and help them understand how fun it can be to learn English.

KOTESOL: Right. Then, to sum up, learning should be fun for students, and we might say that there are parents, administrators, and even teachers who need to “grow up” and educate themselves better on how language learning is best achieved. Dr. Lee, thank you for this engaging interview. We look forward to your featured presentation at our April conference.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.