

## The Dilemma We Currently Confront

By Dr. Boyoung Lee, AnySpeak CEO

I must confess that I may not fit the typical mold of a successful businessperson when it comes to strategies, tactics, and profit-making attitudes. However, I have been fortunate to be able to collaborate with some of the best talent in the



English education industry – individuals from highly esteemed companies. These opportunities have allowed me the time and perspective to observe how learners and consumers have been evolving in their preferences, traits, and visions over the years. From my days at Ewha University's College of Education through my career as a program developer, teaching practitioner, and teacher trainer, I have firmly

rooted my beliefs about learners in both theory and practice. I've held steadfast to the notion that successful language learners should possess certain attitudes, learning styles, and practices, and these beliefs have seldom been questioned.

In summary, the more effort you invest, the greater the reward – or as they say, "the more challenging the journey, the sweeter the outcome." These words of wisdom are often intended to motivate learners to persevere, no matter how demanding the process may seem. Yet, the fundamental question remains: "Must it be arduous in the first place?" In essence, my conviction has been that learners of English as a foreign language should be active, proactive, engaged, patient, and tenacious. It's a tough path... so whatever it takes!

As I write this, I find myself in San Jose, in a speech training room at the SAP Center, typically known for hosting premier ice hockey games. Just a few minutes ago, I had the privilege of witnessing what the new Samsung smartphones equipped with AI can offer in their next model. The presenter declared, "Now you have your own personal interpreter on your phone!" While it wasn't happening simultaneously, it was still impressive enough to significantly simplify communication. It's mind-blowing! I wouldn't mind having one myself. However, as I watched the presentation, I couldn't help but wonder, "Does it even matter anymore to strive to become a 'successful English learner?'" This led me to a profound question: "Has the process of learning English become meaningless now that people have 'their own interpreter on their phone?'" And finally, I found myself introspectively

asking, "Now that we have what we have, what should I say and do to keep learners motivated to continue learning, and does it still hold value?"

This issue has been a topic of numerous discussions and research in academia, and personally, I've grappled with it since I embarked on this app project two years ago. The app is called "Anyspeak" with the function of providing common daily expressions for language learning and translation service at the same time with a little bit of video lectures as well. Apparently throughout the course of developing this app (it still has lots of room for further improvement), I learned a lot about the traits of today's learners and their wants and needs. Therefore, as the producer of this supposed business item, I've often found myself torn between conventional knowledge, my convictions about how learning should be, and the opinions, wisdom, and beliefs of marketers. The challenge lies in discerning what today's learners truly value and what they might perceive as outdated. Regardless of the future developments that may emerge, the most concerning aspect is the possibility that learners might underestimate the value of learning a foreign language, cease to explore its underlying systems, and miss the beauty of the learning process itself. What a tragedy that would be!

The essence of learning lies in the expansion of our minds and intellect. It's about enriching our inner selves and nurturing our brains to lead more prosperous lives. English has never been just a practical skill; it has always been about personal growth. I still vividly remember my first English teacher's words: "Keep an open mind." At the age of 12, I didn't fully grasp the meaning behind those words. However,



now, after decades of involvement in the English teaching industry, that advice resonates deeply with me.

I've come to realize that without an open-minded mindset, no matter how extensive one's vocabulary or grammar knowledge may be, true understanding remains elusive. Communication might occur, but genuine comprehension does not. It's ironic that I only recently fully grasped the true significance of that teacher's early advice, especially in a world where distortions and misunderstandings seem all too common.

Although those words of wisdom are precious, the challenge lies in how I can convey their true significance when learners are inclined to opt for an easier path or simply prioritize the convenience of using language apps. This is indeed the dilemma we currently confront.

I actively engage with AI technology, and overall, I find it quite beneficial. However, this doesn't mean that I've lost my enthusiasm for practicing reading and speaking in English. In fact, I cherish the beauty of learning, and it's something I

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never want to forgo. While cultural understanding, cognitive benefits, and personal growth are invaluable, I find myself pondering whether these can still be attained through the easier route of automatic translation on AI-powered devices.

My intention here is not to be stubborn or resistant to embracing what we commonly refer to as "innovation." Undoubtedly, the world is progressing towards "better, faster, and more convenient" solutions. In this evolving landscape, I can't help but question the meaning and purpose of "learning." It's a perplexing dilemma. In this context, what significance does "learning" hold or need to offer? It's a whole new chapter for us ELT experts.

## KOTESOL IC 2024: Featured Speaker Interview

### "Native-Speakerism Is an Ideology That Benefits Western ELT Institutions"

Dr. Robert J. Lowe, Ochanomizu University

*Robert J. Lowe is a professor at Ochanomizu University in Japan. Prof. Lowe is a featured speaker at our upcoming international conference in April. He will be presenting a featured session on "Native-Speakerism and (Dis)empowerment: An Autoethnography of Success and Failure in Language Teaching and Learning." He will also be conducting a featured workshop on duoethnography in ELT. Recently, Prof. Lowe provided The English Connection with the following interview. — Ed.*

**The English Connection (TEC):** First of all, thank you for lending your time to do this interview for *The English Connection*. Would you begin by giving us a bit of background information on you before you began your career in Japan?

**Prof. Lowe:** Thank you for the invitation. I am originally from the town of Heanor, which is in the county of Derbyshire in the UK. I come from a family of educators, with many of my relatives having worked in schools both in the UK and overseas. At university, I originally enrolled as a student in the English department, but after a year of miserably trying (and failing) to diagram sentences, I decided to transfer to the sociology program instead. This was a much better match for my interests, and I graduated in 2008. Like many young graduates with an interest in travel, I decided to enroll in a CELTA course, and soon after finishing, I was given the opportunity to teach in an *eikaiwa* (English conversation) school in Japan at the age of 22. From there, my "native speaker" privilege helped open doors to part-time teaching in the higher education sector, and I capitalized on this through graduate school study to eventually get a faculty position.

**TEC:** It seems that many people who end up in the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics do not start out there. Your master's and doctorate degrees are both in applied linguistics. What was the impetus for moving from sociology into linguistics?

**Prof. Lowe:** I think it's important to distinguish between "linguistics" and "applied linguistics." I wouldn't call myself a linguist, as I don't study language directly. I think of applied linguistics as a field that studies "real-life language-related problems ... in diverse social, professional, and academic contexts" (Mahboob & Knight, 2010, p. 1), and for me this means studying critical issues in the field of ELT. My background in sociology is quite important here, as I would describe my research as something like the "critical sociology of ELT." In that sense, I didn't move from sociology to linguistics so much as combine the two. I initially became interested in studying applied linguistics academically due partly to a growing interest in the field that was slowly turning into my profession, and partly for the rather mercenary reason that it would open doors to jobs at the university level. The

