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Between Extremes: Reflections on Teaching ESL in Korea and Australia

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Abstract: *Coming from a background teaching ESL at a private elementary school in Korea—an extremely homogeneous and academically competitive environment—I was used to rigid hierarchy, tightly structured classrooms, and a relatively uniform student body from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Transitioning to a low-income, highly diverse school in Melbourne's west, where the majority of students are EAL learners, first- or second-generation immigrants, refugees, and Pacific Islanders, was a profound culture shock. While many of these students are entitled to additional support and English language programs, such support is often inconsistent or unavailable in practice. Adjusting to a system that prioritizes student autonomy—where classroom movement and behavior are loosely regulated—presented a steep learning curve.*

Keywords: extremes, reflections, teaching ESL, Korea, Australia

INTRODUCTION

After more than two years of teaching in Australia, I've come to recognize both the challenges and strengths of each system. This reflection explores those contrasts and considers how ESL pedagogy must adapt across dramatically different cultural and structural contexts.

Finding a balance between the Korean and Australian education systems has been a constant internal negotiation. In Korea, student autonomy is rarely emphasized. Classrooms operate within a clear, often unspoken hierarchy, and teacher authority is rarely questioned—sometimes to a fault. By contrast, in Australia, the only consistent sign of hierarchy I've experienced is students referring to me as "sir"—though even that can be undercut by open displays of disrespect. I never imagined I would be called a vulgar name in class, or that a student might respond to a question about lateness with, "Because I can."

The contrast is striking. I've had Korean students tearfully apologize for arriving 30 seconds late and risking their perfect attendance records, while in Australia I've seen students casually arrive 20 minutes late, browse their phones during lessons, or leave class to vape in the bathroom. Although policies state that phones must be kept in lockers, enforcing this rule is nearly impossible. Teachers are discouraged from physically taking a student's device for fear of professional liability or accusations of misconduct. In many cases, discipline is so tightly tied to safeguarding student wellbeing that it leaves teachers powerless in the face of blatant rule-breaking.

In Korea, if I had seen a student smoking in the bathroom, I likely would have confiscated the cigarette and the student would have expected consequences. Such an act would be inconceivable in Australia. While the emphasis on student safety and emotional wellbeing is undoubtedly important, it often comes at the cost of classroom order and teacher authority.

This culture of extreme autonomy can easily lead to disengagement. While student choice and ownership over learning are commendable in theory, the reality—at least in the school where I work—is that many students simply opt out of learning altogether. I've received essays from native English-speaking Year 10 students that are virtually unreadable: lacking structure, grammar, punctuation, and riddled with basic spelling errors. When I compare this to the polished writing of Grade 6 Korean students—produced in a second language and under far more academic pressure—it's difficult not to feel disheartened.

Australia's education system has largely rejected rote memorization, treating it as outdated or even harmful. But in pushing back so hard, it has often abandoned essential skill development. I've encountered students in Year 10 who struggle to multiply single-digit numbers without a calculator. While Korea certainly overemphasizes rote learning—sometimes requiring students to memorize obscure vocabulary even native speakers rarely use—Australia often suffers from the opposite extreme, leaving critical academic gaps unaddressed.

At times, it feels as though the notion of teaching discipline has quietly disappeared from the Australian system. It doesn't appear in the national teaching standards. In staffrooms, teachers frequently express concern over student behavior and chronic disengagement, yet there's a pervasive sense of helplessness. Without structural support, that frustration can easily become cynicism, which in turn fosters negativity in classrooms already burdened by socioeconomic and emotional challenges.

I don't share these comparisons to complain, but to ask: must we always swing so far to one side? Why must educational systems fully embrace one philosophy while dismissing the other? In Australia, structure is often viewed as oppressive. In Korea, emotional warmth and student voice

are undervalued. Couldn't both systems benefit from adopting aspects of the other? Korean classrooms might be transformed by more encouragement, emotional support, and flexibility. Meanwhile, Australian schools could restore much-needed boundaries, clear consequences, and expectations for behavior and effort.

If I were a student today, seated in a classroom with unrestricted access to a laptop or phone and no real consequences for misusing it, I know I would have chosen YouTube over schoolwork, too. I've spent hours trying to coax just a few sentences out of students—an inefficiency that reflects a broader issue. In Australia, the teacher's role is often romanticized as a gentle guide or mentor, with students expected to take full ownership of their learning. It sounds admirable in theory, but in practice, it often falls apart.

This reflection is not about choosing Korea over Australia, or vice versa. It is about questioning whether either system, in their current form, truly serves all learners. Perhaps the solution lies in a balanced approach—one that blends structure with compassion, autonomy with accountability, and emotional support with academic rigor.

Biography

Jeremy Bittner is an English teacher of over 14 years and is currently teaching English and supporting EAL students at a school in Melbourne.