

Title of Project:

Analysis of Classroom Dynamics in a Teaching Methods Course:
An EFL Teacher Educator's Beliefs and Instructional Decisions
about Teaching English in South Korea

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

Soon after Hymes (1972) introduced the concept communicative competence to the field of language teaching, it became widely accepted as a learning goal (Savignon, 1972; Widdowson, 1978). Given the impetus on the globalization of English, communicative language teaching (CLT), which emphasized speaking proficiency and the pragmatic aspects of communication over linguistic correctness, became a major goal of English education in many countries including South Korea. Beginning in the late 1990s, the Korean Ministry of Education (MOE) actively promoted this teaching method in K-12 English education. After conducting multiple revisions of the English curriculum over 20 years, the MOE no longer specifically recommends CLT but emphasizes communication (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Not surprisingly, early research on Korean English teachers' responses to the top-down teaching initiative demonstrated their immense confusion and confrontational disagreement on many different levels. Initially, teachers criticized the MOE's hasty emphasis on spoken proficiency as simply too radical to implement (e.g., Dash, 2002). Without adequate explanation and support, teachers kept reporting that the new expectations were not realistic and they needed more relevant training (Choi, 2000; Guiloteaux, 2004; S.-Y. Kim, 2002; Li, 1998; Nunan, 2003). Acknowledging that the reform was being rushed, the MOE subsequently initiated investment in English teacher education, such as increasing the number of required courses on language skill development and pedagogic knowledge and providing opportunities for in-service teachers to study abroad in English speaking countries (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). Furthermore, some local MOEs provided additional financial aid for English teachers' professional development (personal communication, August 17, 2014). Another major investment included developing textbooks and teaching materials focusing on communication (Kwon, 1997, 2000), in addition to hiring many native English speakers as teachers in K-9 schools (Yonhap News, 2015, 2016).

However, classroom-based research indicates that teachers have continued to perceive teaching communicative competence as an unrealistic goal in their classrooms, resulting in their

rejection of the practice and return to traditional language teaching methods (K. Ahn, 2009; Butler, 2011; E.-J. Kim, 2008a, 2011; Littlewood, 2007). Teachers have blamed this trend primarily on insufficient training in language skills for teaching that emphasizes speaking proficiency and have continued to call for more professional support for developing their English speaking skills, particularly more opportunities to go abroad (e.g., E.-J. Kim, 2011; Na, Ahn, & Kim, 2008). Since Kwon's (1997) report announcing the new MOE initiatives, the Ministry has paid little attention to reviewing how effectively the shifts in teacher training curriculum have changed teacher learning and served the needs of teachers. While there have been self-reports of teacher discontent, there is a need for research on teacher education and the perspectives of teacher educators on the issues, as they often serve on influential committees for textbook adoption, curriculum, professional development, and teacher certification examinations. Thus, the impact of teacher educators on teacher education and subsequent curriculum implementation calls for research on their beliefs, knowledge, and lived experiences while training English teachers for Korean schools. In particular, empirical research on teacher educators' beliefs about teaching for communication and their actual teaching practices would shed light on whether and how pre-service teachers are being prepared to utilize the communicative approaches without reverting to traditional teaching methods. Accordingly, this research was a case study of one teacher educator's practices in a graduate level English teaching methods course.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- a. What are the teacher educator's beliefs about what teachers should learn from the methods course, and how do they inform her teaching?
- b. How does the teacher educator discuss teaching English for communication, as promoted by the curriculum, within the broader educational context of Korea?

Research Methodology

Responding to a need for empirical research on English teacher education, this qualitative case study was an investigation of how South Korean English education policy and the national curriculum have affected the preparation of Korean English teachers. Findings from an analysis of the curriculum were compared to practices in a graduate level English teaching methodology course in South Korea. The course was selected because it was a required course in English teacher training, in which pre-service teachers to learn teaching methods. By focusing specifically on the teacher educator in this dissertation study, I examined her perspectives on English education and teacher training in Korea, as well as challenges in teacher training that have been often overlooked in previous analyses. This distinctive focus addressed a lack of research on what teacher educators want their pre-service teachers to learn and how they achieve their objectives. Informed by sociocultural challenges that researchers found recently, I drew analytic attention to the teacher educator's beliefs about what teachers should learn in light of mandates from the MOE and how she addressed practical concerns in the methods course. I also examined whether the course prepared pre-service teachers for negotiating their responses to the various contextual challenges that they would encounter in their professional careers.

Summary of Findings

An analysis of the curriculum since the 1990s for English education in Korea showed a consistent emphasis on teaching for communicative competence and practicing communicative teaching approaches, thereby representing the widespread assumption that English is the major means of global communication. It was found that the curriculum did not persist in promoting CLT in particular, suggesting an acknowledgement of teachers' autonomy in making decisions based on students' different learning capabilities. It was also found that the 200-page curriculum did not define some key words and phrases (e.g., cultural diversity, fluency over accuracy, learners' differences) nor provide practical suggestions for teachers, even under sections designated as "Teaching methods." Therefore, reading the curriculum was unlikely to inform teachers about how to create a meaningfully communicative, integrative, collaborative, and participatory learning environment. This lack of explanation provides insights into the MOE's expectations of active intervention by teacher educators and teacher training programs to prepare teachers for teaching. These curricular absences also explain why many teachers still find it difficult to employ communicative approaches two decades after the MOE's investments in teacher training, materials development, and curriculum revisions.

Thematic analyses of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews showed the teacher educator's agreement with teaching English for communication, just as the curriculum analysis reported. Assuming a shared purpose with her students, the teacher educator's priority was, therefore, on developing pre-service teachers' knowledge about English, English teaching, and language learning theories. This emphasis resulted in instruction that was more explanatory than participatory in teacher training. Also, knowing the limitations of an introductory course, the teacher educator had the goal of developing teachers' analytic and critical perspectives for their subsequent continued learning. Instead of providing an evaluation of methods as effective or ineffective, the teacher educator intended to prepare teachers to be theoretically and empirically informed, so they could make decisions for their own students in their unique settings. Although the teacher educator occasionally demonstrated how to contextualize concepts, theories, and hypotheses from their readings to Korean English classrooms, the pre-service teachers' limited background knowledge and a lack of participation often resulted in one-sided instruction from the teacher educator, rather than students' active meaning-making from the readings. During interviews, students articulated how they appreciated the teacher educator's demonstration, as such contextualization was less explicit in other courses in the program, such as English literature, English pronunciation, linguistics, or educational statistics. This finding of teacher-centered instruction, lack of discussions about practices, and lack of active practice for students in the curriculum and the methods course could shed light on why English teachers have blamed inadequate training for their difficulties with communicative teaching. It also suggests a need for more empirical research on English teacher training practices in South Korea, how teacher training does or does not bridge the gap between the curriculum and classroom realities, and the need to prepare pre-service teachers for teaching in various contexts.

Implications

Drawing upon these findings, this research suggests three major implications for educational policy makers and teacher educators in South Korea. First, teacher educators should help pre-service teachers to understand administrative expectations concerning the goals of English education. Second, to be prepared for knowledge-based decision making, pre-service teachers need opportunities to reflect on their beliefs about English teaching, to contextualize knowledge



received in classes and textbooks, and to develop analytic and critical attitudes. Third, teacher educators' practices in developing pre-service teachers' competency in applying knowledge for teaching must be understood in the context of their programs and the educational culture in South Korea.

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