Comparative perspectives towards communicative activities among elementary school teachers in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan

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With the spread of globalization and information technology, the goal of English education in East Asian countries has recently undergone drastic change, with one such change being the introduction of English at the elementary school level. Based on a sociocultural theoretical framework, this study attempts to identify and compare the ways in which local elementary school teachers consider classroom activities in English that are ‘effective’ in their given sociocultural and policy contexts. Employing multivocal ethnography, classroom activities in these countries were videotaped and edited. The edited videotape was shown to elementary school teachers in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, who were then asked to discuss various aspects of teaching practice and activities in small groups. Among the many issues raised by teachers, this paper focuses on their concerns and challenges in employing communicative activities with respect to (1) creating motives and goals that drive communicative activities; (2) identifying developmentally appropriate mediational means; and (3) situating activities in specific contexts. The study found that teachers’ challenges were due to a lack of understanding of three factors, including what constitutes ‘teaching for communicative purposes’, the roles that developmental factors play in EFL learning and teaching, and strategies for harmonizing learning/teaching and context.

I Introduction

Various governments in East Asia, including Korea, Japan and Taiwan, have recently introduced English language education at the elementary school level. Yet implementing these policies has been a challenge for
local teachers. In many cases, regular homeroom teachers who are not
English teachers by training have been asked to teach English. As a
result, many have expressed concerns regarding the English proficiency
levels among elementary school teachers in these countries (Butler,
2004; Kwon, 2000; Lee, 2002; Nunan, 2003). Moreover, the govern-
ments of these countries have promulgated new curricula that require
teachers to emphasize the development of oral communicative skills in
English. As a result, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)
approach has been promoted at the elementary school level. CLT aims
to develop learners’ communicative competence, instead of merely
focusing on linguistic competence (e.g., Celce-Murcia and Hills, 1988;
Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Littlewood, 1981;
Richards and Rodgers, 1986). It thus appears to stand in stark contrast to
the grammar/translation and audiolingual methods that have been the
norm in those countries. One can easily imagine that implementing CLT
represents a substantial challenge to elementary school teachers who are
new to English teaching.

Nunan (1991) listed the following five features as characteristics of
CLT: (1) a focus on communication through interaction; (2) the use of
authentic materials; (3) a focus on the learning process as well as the
language itself; (4) a belief that learners’ own experiences can contribute
to learning; and (5) a linkage between language learning in the classroom
and real-life activities. However, there are numerous interpretations
regarding what CLT should include (Brown, 2001). Related approaches
and methods are often discussed (sometimes confusingly) as part of the
CLT framework. For example, learner-centred as opposed to teacher-
centred curricula and instruction has often been associated with CLT.
Interactive activities in small groups are encouraged in order to maxi-
mize the opportunities for learners to participate in negotiating meaning
through interaction.

While CLT has become the goal in many Asian countries, a growing
number of studies on secondary school education and college education
in Asia have highlighted difficulties in implementing CLT in Asian
socio-cultural contexts (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Burnaby and Sun, 1989;
Gonzalez, 1985; Hu, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 1984; Lamie, 2004; Lee, 2002;
Li, 1998; Sano et al., 1984; Shamin, 1996; Sullivan, 2000). In addition
to a lack of proficiency and training among teachers, the goals and
motivations associated with learning English as well as structural factors
such as a historical focus on written examinations) have limited its implementation. Many have argued that these difficulties stem from differences in cultural values towards learning and teaching, given the Confucian cultural heritage of East Asian nations versus the heritage of the Western states wherein CLT originated (e.g., Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Miller, 1995). However, such explanations have been criticized for oversimplifying cultures in general and ignoring diversity within cultures (McKay, 2002).

As Prabhu (1990) has noted, there is no single approach or method, whether it be CLT or another method, that works for all contexts and no single method works best for a particular context. In comparing ‘communicative pedagogy’ in foreign language classrooms in Britain and Korea, Mitchell and Lee (2003) found that it was both complex and challenging to transfer effective pedagogies directly from one context to the other. Perhaps, as Bax (2004) suggested, what we need is a language teaching approach that focuses primarily on the learning context in its methodology. And indeed this is at the very heart of a sociocultural approach to language learning and teaching: language teaching and learning are situated in a given sociocultural context and thus effective teaching has to be socially constructed and defined (Donato, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Appel, 1994).

II Sociocultural Theory

The key concept of Sociocultural Theory, which has been drawn from the works of Vygotsky and his successors, is the idea that ‘the human mind is mediated’ (Lantolf, 2000: 1). This theory holds that in participating in socially meaningful activities, the higher order functions of the mind can develop through interactions with other human beings and with socially and culturally constructed artifacts such as tools and signs. Vygotsky characterized ‘the zone of proximal development (ZPD)’ as a key feature of one’s learning: learning takes place at one’s ZPD. A learner’s ZPD is defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). According to Vygotsky, imitation and instruction play a major role in leading children from one developmental stage to
another. This perspective sheds another light on the function of imitation, which is often considered as merely a mechanical processes and one which should be avoided in CLT. It is important for teachers, through interacting with students, to discover what their students can do without any assistance and what they can do with assistance. This may enable teachers to provide ‘effective assistance’ in helping their student’s transition to a more advanced developmental stage.

Vygotsky’s central idea of mediation was further developed by his followers, such as Leontiev and others, and formulated into what has come to be known as activity theory. Activities at the elementary school setting often refer to work that involves direct experiences by students rather than simply studying textbooks. However, ‘activities’ in activity theory do not merely mean experiences. ‘Activities’ as conceived of by activity theory refer to goal-directed actions in a collective activity system that are motivated by one’s biological and/or cultural needs and which are realized under certain conditions through mediated means such as language (Lantolf, 2000: 8). According to Leontiev (1978), there are three levels of activities: collective activities that are driven by motives; specific individual or group actions that are driven by conscious goals; and operations that are realized in a specific condition and through the mediation of various artifacts. Thus, activity theory predicts that even if teachers introduce the same activity and students appear to exhibit the same observable behaviours, students may in fact be engaging in different ‘activities’, depending on the motives and goals that their teachers establish for such activities. Coughlan and Duff (1994), for example, showed that the ‘same task’ introduced in a second language classroom generated various activities across participants as well as by the same participants. By the same token, different conditions and mediated means make it possible to achieve the same goals.

In the following discussion, I use the term activities (in italics) within a sociocultural framework and distinguish these from activities (non-italics) as they are conventionally used in government documents and other resources available for teachers.

III Purpose of the present study

In order to identify effective English teaching practices at the elementary school level in Korea, Japan and Taiwan, the purpose of the present
study is to identify and compare local elementary school teachers’ concerns regarding the introduction of ‘communicative activities’ that are intended to develop students’ abilities to communicate in English. More specifically, by employing a sociocultural framework, the study aims to uncover teachers’ concerns with employing communicative activities in their English classes with respect to the following three topics: (1) defining motives and goals that drive activities; (2) identifying developmentally appropriate mediational means; and (3) situating activities in a specific context.

The present literature on English language teaching in East Asian is based primarily on English teaching at the secondary school level and higher, and describes East Asian cultures without attention to intracultural and intercultural variation (McKay, 2002). Since elementary school contexts have been reported to be very different from those at the secondary level (Kubota, 1999), this study aims to offer a detailed examination of English teaching practice in Asia, based on its focus not only on the elementary school level but also on its examination of elementary school teaching practices in different East Asian countries. Before discussing the methodology used herein, I would like to briefly describe the English teaching contexts in Korea, Taiwan and Japan. This will then allow us to situate the research questions addressed by this study in the larger social and historical contexts of these countries.

IV Teaching contexts in Korea, Taiwan and Japan

In Korea, Taiwan and Japan, English has been taught at the secondary school level and beyond as a foreign language. For the majority of students in each of these East Asian countries, English is a medium of academic pursuit or an academic subject required for pursuing higher education. Instruction on reading and writing, with particular emphasis on grammar and translation exercises for the purposes of entrance exams, has been the dominant mode of English education. However, this type of English instruction became a constant target of criticism by the business and other sectors because students did not acquire enough communicative abilities (especially oral proficiencies) to meet the needs of an era of globalization and information technology. (See Butler and Iino, 2005; Chen, 2002; Tsao, 1999; Kwon, 2000 for detailed information on historical backgrounds of English teaching in these countries.)
In order to improve the people’s communicative skills in English, various reforms of English language education have been undertaken. The recent introduction of English at the elementary school level is part of such reforms, and the governments of these countries have specified two common objectives: (1) to develop students’ basic communicative abilities in a foreign language; and (2) to enhance cultural understanding (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2001; Korean Ministry of Education, 1997; Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2001).

However, the ways in which English is introduced vary. While English is a mandatory academic subject in Korea and Taiwan and both governments have played an initiative role in implementing English at the elementary school level, the Japanese government currently gives much autonomy to local governments and individual schools, regarding the introduction of English language education at the elementary school level. Table 1 summarizes the policy contexts for each country’s implementation of English language education at the elementary school level. One can therefore hypothesize that such policy contexts also influence teachers’ practices in each countries as well as their perceptions of their own teaching practice.

V Methodology

Multivocal ethnography (Tobin et al., 1989) was employed in this study. Instead on relying solely upon the researcher’s interpretations to understand behaviour, multivocal ethnography aims to incorporate multiple people’s perspectives in interpreting human behaviour. The goal of such an analytical approach is thereby to increase the validity of data interpretation. Moreover, the emergence of multiple perspectives in and of themselves can be a valuable source of data for understanding cross-cultural issues.

Tobin et al. (1989) presented three discrete perspectives in their multivocal ethnography: the first presented simply a series of videotaped activities (descriptions of the activities by the researchers) and thus showed us as observers such activities; the second was the perspective of ‘insiders’ who performed such activities; and the third consisted of the perspective of observers who were from the cultures in which the observed activities took place (Tobin et al. called the third party
Table 1  English at the elementary school level in Korea, Taiwan and Japan (as of December 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Korea</th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government initiative</td>
<td>Strong central government initiative</td>
<td>General guidelines</td>
<td>Based on local choices; no official guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of introduction</td>
<td>As an academic subject</td>
<td>As an academic subject</td>
<td>Can be introduced as part of ‘international understanding’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date officially introduced</td>
<td>1997: only at the 3rd grade level / By 2002: from 3rd to 6th grades</td>
<td>1998: selected areas / 2001: nationwide at the 5th and 6th grades / 2003: nationwide at the 3rd to 6th grades</td>
<td>2002: introduced based on individual school choice from the 3rd grade and up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of lesson hours</td>
<td>3rd &amp; 4th grades: 34 lessons (40 min.) per year / 5th &amp; 6th grades: 78 lessons per year</td>
<td>72 lessons per year (40 minutes per lesson)</td>
<td>Taught within the ‘period of integrated study’ (varies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks and materials</td>
<td>One textbook for each grade approved by the government</td>
<td>Multiple textbooks approved by the government</td>
<td>No specifically approved textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers who teach English</td>
<td>Primarily homeroom teachers / some teachers of English</td>
<td>Various types of teachers / teachers of English are concentrated in big cities</td>
<td>Primarily homeroom teachers / team teaching with various types of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native speakers</td>
<td>Few working in public schools so far (2004)</td>
<td>Few working in public schools so far (2004)</td>
<td>Many are employed, but the quality varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of English-only instruction</td>
<td>By 2002, a one-hour, once-per-week English class must be taught only through English</td>
<td>Suggested by the central government to conduct lessons in English</td>
<td>No policy clearly articulated by the central government thus far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of written English skills</td>
<td>Reading / writing should be secondary to oral language and should not exceed more than 10% of the lesson time</td>
<td>Balance development of four skills</td>
<td>Focus on spoken English only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table is adapted from Butler (2004)

‘outsiders’). In their study, the videotape scenes were selected in such a way that the outsiders could easily engage in various kinds of dialogues and interpretations among themselves. The outsiders were empowered
to speak essentially as anthropologists, so that the study could contain not only perspectives about the activities in the given culture, but also so that it could present perspectives from different cultures (1989: 9). The present study adopted Tobin et al.’s approach: the author videotaped activities that would lend themselves to comment by observers, conducted brief interviews with the teachers who participated in the activities (i.e., insiders), and held group discussions among local teachers in countries and outside of the country where the activities were held (i.e., outsiders).

Various classroom activities in Japan, Korea and Taiwan were observed and videotaped by the author. The author videotaped 42 hours of classes altogether. After each observation, the teachers whose classes were observed (the insiders) had a brief semi-structured interview, regarding the goals and motives of the activities employed in their classrooms and their general concerns about the implementation of communicative activities in their classes. These interviews lasted from 10 minutes to 30 minutes, depending on the availability of each teacher.

Out of 42 hours of videotaped classroom activities from the three countries, 24 activity clips were selected and edited into a 60-minute video (with approximately 20 minutes of activities from each country). The clips were chosen in consultation with the insiders as well as the author’s research team, which consisted primarily of international graduate students who came from Korea, Taiwan and Japan and had teaching experience in the respective countries. The 24 chosen activity clips were intended to cover various types of activities that have been suggested by the governments in these countries and which are commonly employed in elementary classrooms in each country, including role playing, singing, chanting, games and TPR (Total Physical Response) activities. However, the specific activities chosen were not necessarily intended to represent the ‘typical’ activities of each country’s English language lessons at the elementary school level: current practice entails substantial diversity, and it is difficult to characterize what constitute ‘typical activities’ in general. Rather, activities were selected with the intention of serving as stimuli to elicit teachers’ opinions and interpretations and to help us understand and compare teachers’ views and concerns regarding ‘communicative-based activities’ in their own English teaching contexts.
These videotapes were shown to elementary school teachers in Korea, Japan and Taiwan (i.e., outsiders), who were then asked to discuss various aspects of teaching practices and activities in small groups. Forty-six Japanese teachers in Tokyo, 22 Korean teachers in Seoul, and 44 Taiwanese teachers in Taipei participated in this study. All the teachers were volunteers and all were recruited primarily through teacher-training programme and locally organized, informal teacher study groups. Therefore, one may consider the groups as consisting of teachers who were particularly motivated to develop effective instructional approaches in their English classes. The overwhelming majority of teachers from Japan and Korea in the present study were homeroom teachers, but both local teachers of English and homeroom teachers were recruited from Taiwan (reflecting the current policy contexts of each of these countries, as indicated in Table 1).

The teachers were instructed that the activities in the video did not necessarily represent ‘typical’ activities from each country; they then were asked to comment freely on them or to compare the activities shown in the video with their own practice. The discussions were among small groups of teachers (consisting of four to six teachers in most cases), and were conducted either in English or in their local languages. Each discussion lasted for approximately 2 hours (including the first hour spent watching the videotapes). The discussions in the second hour were audiotaped.

This method yielded extensive data through the activities documented and the transcriptions of the comments by both insiders and outsiders. Since the group discussions were conducted in a rather unstructured manner, a wide range of topics were discussed among teachers. The topics discussed were classified into three categories corresponding to the three research questions that were the focus of this study (i.e., topics related to the goals and motives of the activities, topics related to mediational means, and topics related to specific conditions). In each category, themes were identified. The analysis itself was sociocultural in nature, given that multivocality and intertextuality were the basic premises of the analysis. In addition, I also examined policy reports, activity reports prepared by selected schools, and curricula and other related written materials, all of which became the sources for this ethnographic study.
VI Results and discussion

1 Defining motives and goals that drive communicative activities

In order to develop students’ communicative abilities in English, all three governments suggest to their teachers a number of sample activities, including various types of games, songs, chants and role plays. All of the teachers who participated in this study indicated that they had employed and tried such activities in their classes. However, according to Activity Theory, simply introducing suggested communicative activities alone does not necessarily lead to the same communicative activities. Through the discussions among teachers after watching the video, it became quite clear that the teachers employed the same suggested communicative activities but with different motives and goals in mind, and thus their students actually engaged in different activities. Indeed, one of the challenges among teachers was how to set ‘appropriate goals’ for communicative activities. A number of teachers indicated that they were not sure why they were administering such activities: some may simply be doing so because their respective governments have suggested they do so. The difficulty they experienced appeared to stem largely from a lack of understanding of what constituted ‘teaching for communicative purposes’ (i.e., the heart of CLT) in EFL contexts.

This point can be illustrated by using role-playing as an example. The participating teachers identified two activity clips as role-playing activities in the video: one was a clip from a Japanese 6th grade class and the other was from a Taiwanese 4th grade class. The activity in the Japanese class was taught via team-teaching between a homeroom teacher (Mr Suzuki) and a native English-speaking teacher (Mr Jones).1 A large map of the world was placed on the blackboard. Each student and both teachers had a different national flag tied to a string around his or her neck. There were no chairs or desks for students in the classroom: the students were sitting on the floor while the two teachers were standing in front of them. After reviewing country names in English, Mr Jones first explained to the students the procedures for the activity in English: two people from different countries are presumed to meet at a World Cup game and greet each other in English. The two teachers then demonstrated the activity via a skit in front of the students:

Mr Suzuki:   Hello! My name is Masahiko.
Mr Jones:    Hello! My name is Chris. Nice to meet you.
Mr Suzuki: Nice to meet you. (They shake hands)
Mr Jones: Where are you from?
Mr Suzuki: I am from . . . (Pointing at the flag that was hanging from his neck) Argentina.
Mr Jones: Oh, Argentina? Where is Argentina?
Mr Suzuki: (Pointing at Argentina on the map) Here is Argentina. Where are you from?
Mr Jones: I am from Germany.
Mr Suzuki: Oh, Germany? Where is Germany?
Mr Jones: (Pointing at Germany on the map) Germany is here.
Mr Suzuki: I see. Thank you. See you.
Mr Jones: See you.

After repeating these expressions after Mr Jones a couple of times, the students were asked to move around the room and greet as many of their peers as possible in this way.

Many of the teachers in Korea and Taiwan who watched this activity liked the team-teaching and modelling done by the teachers. However, what aspect of English should be the focus of modelling in EFL at the elementary school level? Should the focus be on the language (e.g., useful expressions and vocabulary), attitudes, or the experience of communicating in a foreign language? Teachers who felt the language component should be the central focus of modelling commented positively on this Japanese activity; one Taiwanese teacher commented that ‘this is a good way to provide students with opportunities to listen and use useful expressions that they may be able to use outside of the classroom’. For these teachers, activities should be a means to providing students with authentic language input and the opportunity to practise using such inputs. Thus, memorizing ‘proper’ and ‘authentic’ expressions and practising such expressions with other people are seen as the key actions in role-playing. According to these teachers, such actions (i.e., memorizing and practising) in class are indispensable steps towards developing communicative competence in EFL contexts where students have very limited exposure to the target language.

Other teachers, however, expressed concerns about the inflexibility or unauthentic nature of the activity described above. Although the students could have many opportunities to interact with other students, the skit was prescribed and there was little room for students to be creative. ‘There was no information gap’, a Taiwanese teacher said. ‘You don’t have to ask “where are you from?” to a person who has a Union Jack slung over his neck. It’s simply a vocabulary exercise.’ Interestingly, Mr Suzuki himself defined the two goals of this activity as follows: to
familiarize his students with basic greetings and mannerisms (including making eye contact and shaking hands) and to enable them to locate different countries on a world map in order to enhance their international understanding.

An interesting contrast to this activity can be seen in a role-playing activity from a Taiwanese class which was also shown to teachers as part of the videotape. In this activity, a Taiwanese teacher brought various kinds of clothes and put them on the blackboard using magnets. The students were divided into groups of four and role-played ‘shopping at a clothing store.’ The basic skit was described in the students’ textbook, but the students were encouraged to create their own skit based on the model described in the textbook. A group of four girls (playing three customers and one shop owner) acted out their skit in front of the blackboard. Other students were sitting at their desks and were instructed by the teacher to watch and evaluate the classmates’ role play.

Girl 1: Wow! Look! New store! It’s so cool. Let’s look! (Walking toward the centre)
Girl 1: It’s a hat. It’s so cool ... I like the red one.
Girl 1: Excuse me. (Approaching the shop owner) Can I try?
Girl 1: (Picking up a red hat) Wow, it’s so cool. How much is it?
Shop owner: 200 dollars.
Girl 1: Thank you.

Many teachers in each of the three countries commented positively on the ‘authenticity’ of this activity (e.g., using real clothes). Some teachers, especially those who believe that a central focus of ‘teaching for communication’ should be ‘having the experience of communicating in English’, admired the autonomy that the students had in this role play. A 3rd grade Japanese teacher said: ‘The goals of English activities are to give our children opportunities to expresses themselves in English and make them feel confident about using English.’ Other teachers, however, thought that the teacher should exercise more control over their students’ activities in EFL. Since the majority of EFL students have a very limited vocabulary and limited linguistic knowledge of English, those who take English lessons outside of school tend to dominate activities. In the example above, one girl dominated the entire activity. The student who played the shop owner had only one line, and the other two girls remained completely silent. From a sociocultural perspective, we might question the extent to which socially constructed learning actually occurred via such interaction. Some teachers expressed their concern
that students often produce and memorize ‘inaccurate’ expressions during role plays; role plays can thus reinforce fossilization if they are not carefully planned and structured in EFL contexts. The teachers did not yet seem to have developed good strategies for how best to deal with such occasions. Illustrating this, a Korean 5th grade teacher said: ‘We are not living in an English-speaking world. I hesitate to create an open-ended situation. To be honest with you, I often do not know how to say things correctly in English when I am asked by my students!’

As discussed above, even if teachers employ the ‘same’ communicative activities suggested by their governments or other sources, the actual activities that the students engage in appeared to be very different depending on the motives and goals that teachers set for such activities. Within the same country, we found much diversity in the way teachers set goals for their activities. Most crucially, a number of teachers commented that they were not sure why they employed such communicative activities, and they began to wonder to what extent and in what way such activities help their students to acquire communicative abilities.

However, the literature on CLT and research on second language acquisition has yet to provide a solid understanding of what constitutes ‘communicative abilities’ for non-native speakers of a given language and thus what constitutes ‘teaching for communicative purposes’ in EFL contexts. Part of the difficulty that teachers face appears to be due to our lack of understanding of this issue. Certain key phrases, such as ‘information gap’, ‘student-centred activities’ and ‘authentic language’, have gained currency among teachers as well as policy makers in East Asia, without their meanings being fully examined in local contexts. One could say that it is quite ‘unauthentic’ in the first place to have a conversation in a foreign language among people who already share the same first language. The goals and motives for activities for ‘teaching for communicative purposes’ have to be defined with such specific local contexts in mind.

2 Identifying developmentally appropriate mediational means

The second challenge that the teachers have was found to be how best to identify activities and assist students in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Foreign language education methods and approaches in general have paid relatively less attention to developmental factors,
perhaps because much of the research on foreign language education has focused (until recently) on older learners rather than children. However, all of the teachers in the present study expressed their serious concerns regarding developmental issues in their English classes. Teachers who taught higher grade students had a particularly hard time developing activities. Teachers cannot motivate higher grade students merely by introducing chants, songs, or games as suggested by their governments and other resources; such activities may not be intellectually challenging for higher grade students. The same activities based on similar motives might be perceived very differently by students depending on their developmental stages. A Japanese 6th grade teacher commented in this regard that ‘3rd grade students would say “I could understand English” even if they could recognize only one word in an utterance. But 6th grade students would say “I could understand only two words”.

As Vygotsky (1978) stressed, it is important for teachers, through interacting with students, to discover their students’ ZPD: namely, the gap between what their students can do without any assistance and what they can do with assistance. In practice, however, this is easier said than done. In foreign language classrooms, there is often a significant discrepancy between what students appear to do in the foreign language and their actual developmental level. A number of teachers observed such a mismatch between the activities portrayed in the video and the apparent development level of the students observed therein. Many teachers in each of three countries commented on the danger of introducing activities in English classes that do not match students’ developmental stages. According to them, such developmental mismatches often create the notion among students that ‘English class has lots of games but is not serious business’ (a Korean 6th grade teacher), and that this can eventually demotivate students. Some students appear to grow frustrated with what they can do in English versus what is possible in their native language. Many teachers indicated that it is urgent for their governments to create developmentally sensitive curricula for their students.

Meanwhile, some of the teachers in this study had already begun developing their own strategies for introducing intellectually appropriate activities and effectively assisting their students. Such strategies included the effective use of the students’ L1 and using content that was recently covered in other subjects with the help of various visual aids.
In many ‘CLT-based classrooms’ in East Asia, it is often felt that the language ideally should be taught only through the medium of the targeted language; the Korean government has gone so far as to require their teachers to teach English only through the medium of English. One 6th grade Korean teacher said: ‘I know we are supposed to use English only in English classrooms. But when I use role-plays in my class, I let my children choose stories that they wish to work on, and allow them to use Korean when they are not sure how to say something in English during the role play. They sometimes end up using much more Korean than English, but this way, I can at least maintain their motivation.’ Various teachers shared their experiences with regard to incorporating content covered in other subjects into their English classes with the use of visual aids and hands-on activities. Although the effectiveness of introducing content-based instruction at the elementary school level in EFL contexts is still unknown, a number of homeroom teachers commented positively on utilizing students’ familiarity with content learned in other subjects and tailoring instruction based on their own knowledge of individual students’ interests, in order to create their English activities. Homeroom teachers may indeed have an advantage in choosing appropriate content and incorporating it into their English instruction because they are teaching multiple subjects to their students.

Finally, one area that generated heated discussions among the teachers involved in the present study was the use of written language at the elementary school level. As shown in Table 1, the three countries have different policies towards the introduction of reading and writing at the elementary school level. While written language is part of the instruction in both Korea and Taiwan, the current Japanese policy does not allow teachers to introduce written language in their English activities. According to the Japanese government, the rationale behind this policy is that a simultaneous introduction of sounds and letters would be overwhelming for elementary school students and may negatively affect their motivation (MEXT, 2001). However, as far as the author is aware, there is no empirical data to support this rationale at present.

Many Korean and Taiwanese teachers as well as some Japanese teachers questioned the Japanese government’s current policy and commented that students, upper grade students in particular, need to have instruction in written English to facilitate their learning. Some Japanese teachers, however, questioned what they viewed as excessively
demanding written language components in Taiwanese classes (such as the phonics instruction for 1st graders as shown in one of the video clips). These Japanese teachers were concerned that introducing written language at the elementary school level may deprive students from paying attention to the oral components of English language, and insisted that written language should not be introduced at the elementary school level. Cummins’s well-known interdependence hypothesis predicts that a student’s L1 literacy skills are transferable to L2 literacy skills in an adequate literacy environment (Cummins, 1981; 2000). However, not enough is known yet about the instructional role of written language in either children’s oral development in English or in their literacy development in their native languages in EFL contexts. While there is a need to develop understanding in this regard, this must be done by examining the instructional role of written language within the sociocultural contexts (e.g., the literacy tradition) and policy contexts specific to each country.

3 Situating activities in a specific local context

The third challenge that the teachers addressed was how to situate English activities in their respective sociocultural contexts. Some teachers addressed this issue as part of a broader discussion of ‘classroom management’. However, this wording can be misleading from a sociocultural framework because it connotes that teachers are the sole agents controlling students’ behaviour as well as the physical environment and atmosphere in their classes. While each participant (including both teachers and students) may have different roles in activities in their classes, each of them should be responsible for harmonizing both learning and teaching with their respective classrooms. In this respect, I would like to use a term ‘classroom harmonization’ as opposed to ‘classroom management’ in this paper.

Classroom harmonization, the art of harmonizing learning and teaching with context, encompasses various components: it includes both the arrangement of the physical conditions of a given classroom (e.g., the size of the class, seating arrangements, classroom cleanliness, the availability of various technologies) as well as the integration of various psychological variables pertaining to both students and teachers (e.g., the expected roles and behaviours of students and teachers,
motivations, anxieties, self-images). Virtually every single teacher who participated in this study commented to some degree on the harmonization of classroom activities in the video and shared their concerns about this dimension, thereby indicating their genuine concern with the harmonization of their classroom environments. The following dialogue among a group of Japanese teachers exemplifies this concern. The exchanges below represent the first few lines of dialogue among the group of Japanese teachers after they observed the video clip showing Korean classroom activities.

Teacher 1: I got the impression that everybody is motivated to learn English in Korea.
Teacher 2: Yes, the atmosphere of the classrooms tells you about their motivation. Even though their class sizes are big, this did not seem to bother them. Both the teachers and students are like ‘OK, let’s learn English!’ But I don’t think we have that kind of atmosphere in Japanese classrooms. I wonder if Korea has ‘gakkyu hokai’ [note: this can be translated as ‘classroom failure’] like we have in Japan? I guess that Korean society gives more incentives to people who are good at English ...
Teacher 3: Yeah, that’s what I heard.
Teacher 2: Compared with Japanese children at public schools in general, my impression from the tape is that Koreans are more motivated to learn and teach English.
Teacher 1: Yes, the tape shows societal characteristics, doesn’t it? In Japan, schools tend to have more open space, often with no desks, involve more physical movement in their activities, invite native English speakers into their classrooms and so forth. In Korea, they seem to introduce activities within the regular classroom configuration.
Teacher 2: Yes, their activities are similar to what secondary schools in Japan do: more academic-based activities with students seated at their desks. At first, I wondered if children like these kinds of activities, but they seem to enjoy the activities in the tape. I wonder if Korean children may be more obedient to teachers ... My children probably wouldn’t be able to sit at their desks and quietly watch dancing figures in English videos like they do in the Korean classroom.

The phenomenon of gakkyu hokai (classroom failure), mentioned by Teacher 2 above, refers to an educational phenomenon in Japanese elementary schools wherein order breaks down because of students’ failure to follow socially or conventionally expected behaviours in class (although the phenomenon has yet to be clearly defined in any sociological way). The result is that classes can no longer effectively be held. Student behaviours that lead to this include ignoring or disobeying teachers’ directions, walking around the classroom during class, chatting during the class, throwing stationery goods or other objects at other
people during the class, and so forth. *Gakkyu hokai* has gained much attention in Japan since the late 1990s. What is characteristic about *gakkyu hokai* is that it does not simply refer to problematic behaviours among a few unruly students; rather, triggered by such behaviours among a limited number of students, it is often the entire class that loses order and does not function. This can happen in both experienced teachers’ classes as well as in novice teachers’ classrooms. It is estimated that approximately 10% of the elementary school classes in Tokyo are in a state of *gakkyu hokai* at any given time (Kobayashi, 2001). The reasons for *gakkyu hokai* are not yet clear but there appears to be a growing number of children who have difficulty coping with others in group settings such as the classroom environment (Kobayashi, 2001).

Of course, classroom harmonization is not an issue that pertains only to English classes. However, some Japanese teachers in the present study indicated that classroom harmonization could be more challenging during English activities because teachers are often expected to do something different or to create a different atmosphere in the classroom during English activities. Some children may feel more ‘free’ during English activities. Moreover, there are some cultural differences in what may be considered as ‘good’ classroom harmonization (Geert, 1986). Such differences in perception may occasionally lead to disagreements over classroom harmonization between local teachers and foreign teachers in team-teaching contexts, as one can see from the following remark from a 3rd grade Japanese teacher who had worked with a teacher from Britain: ‘She [referring to the British teacher] said she could not stand the general tone of my class. In Japan, we tend to let the children talk freely and spontaneously during the class. But she said she could not believe it.’ Lewis (1995), based on her ethnographic study of Japanese preschool and elementary education, indicated that she was ‘surprised that Japanese teachers seemed to downplay their own authority’ (p.114). While such differences in perception towards classroom harmonization can be challenging to resolve, some Japanese teachers also mentioned that they were inspired by the different pedagogical approaches that foreign teachers take.

In addition to the Japanese teachers, both the Korean and Taiwanese teachers also addressed their concerns regarding classroom harmonization. Some teachers in Korea in the present study stated that they felt it would be inefficient to keep their classes in order if they were asked to
do so through the medium of English only (as mentioned, the Korean government has asked teachers to teach English through the medium of English only). Korean teachers can learn various types of classroom English expressions at the mandatory teachers’ training programmes, including sets of classroom commands such as ‘listen to me’ and ‘be quiet’. While such classroom English is certainly useful, almost all of the Korean teachers in the study indicated that they primarily use Korean for classroom harmonization.

In sum, classroom harmonization in English classes appeared to be a pressing concern among the elementary school teachers in the present study. The teachers observed that there are many changes in students’ behaviour that have occurred in recent years and that it is getting more and more difficult to cope with such changes. There is no universally ‘good’ way to harmonize classrooms; perceptual differences toward classroom harmonization seem to exist even within the same country as well as across countries. The teachers in the present study found it challenging to employ activities that somehow diverge from what they have been practising in other classes and yet through which learning takes place in harmony within a given context.

VII Conclusion

By using multivocal ethnography, this study revealed a number of concerns and difficulties that teachers face in implementing English activities at the elementary school level in East Asian EFL contexts. Based on a sociocultural framework, the paper discussed such teachers’ concerns with respect to (1) creating motives and goals that drive communicative activities; (2) identifying developmentally appropriate mediational means; and (3) situating activities in a given context. While some concerns were more commonly expressed by teachers across each of the countries studied herein, others were more rooted in specific sociocultural and policy contexts. There was substantial diversity in their concerns towards implementing communicative activities within each country.

Despite such differences, this study indicated that there are a number of important factors that need to be taken into account in developing approaches in English activities/teaching in each of the countries studied herein. The first is that there appears to be no clear definition of
what constitutes ‘communicative competence’ for foreign language learners (i.e., non-native speakers) and thus what constitutes ‘teaching for communicative purposes’ remains ambiguous. Without specifying motives and goals, the introduction of communicative activities into classrooms does not necessarily lead to children learning. In order to help teachers identify socially and cognitively meaningful motives and goals for their activities, teachers need both a theoretically consistent and operationalized definition of communicative competence for foreign language learners. A second factor that needs to be taken into account is the insufficient consideration given to developmental factors in current curricula. Effective mediational means have to be identified based on students’ developmental stages, or more precisely, ZPD in Vygotsky’s terms. While all three countries in this study are still largely in the process of developing curricula for English language education at the elementary school level, greater consideration needs to be given to developmental factors in their curricula and suggested activities for teachers and students. A third factor is the challenge that teachers face in situating activities while considering classroom harmony. This process has to be carried out through extensive negotiations and dialogues between teachers and students as well as between teachers in the case of team-teaching. Of course, each of the three factors mentioned above need to be further examined and incorporated into English teaching approaches within the specific sociocultural and policy contexts of each country.

Lastly, I would like to suggest the value of the methodology used in the present study both as a research method for understanding teaching and learning behaviours in various contexts and as a pedagogical tool for learning. In the present study, multiple perspectives were elicited through small-group discussions among teachers wherein the researcher exercised relatively little guidance and involvement in the process. By inviting multiple viewpoints though such dialogue, the interpretations which are thereby elicited can in turn serve as the source of analysis of learning and teaching in a given sociocultural context. This can be a powerful means of understanding and incorporating multiple perspectives towards teaching and learning behaviour (or to validate researchers’ interpretations in certain cases) for research purposes. This dialogue format also may minimize the unequal relationship between the researcher and participants (which can occasionally become an issue
between interviewers and interviewees, for instance). In addition to its potential merit as a research tool, the process of engaging teachers in a dialogue amongst themselves also can be a wonderful opportunity for teachers to learn, and thus, this may be an effective tool in teacher-training programmes. While the potential here remains to be proven empirically, it clearly may be a worthwhile subject of future research.

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Notes

1 The pseudo names are used in this paper.
2 Although comparing the perspectives of US and Asian teachers was not the primary objective of this study, I asked five TESOL specialists in the USA (who themselves were trainers of ESL teachers) to watch the same video. All five US TESOL specialists commented that the activities of the East Asian classrooms shown in the video portrayed too much teacher control, an overemphasis on rote memorization, and too little individual attention in the activities shown in general.
3 Different statistics are available depending on how one defines the state of gakkyu hokai.

VIII References

Butler, Y.G. 2004: What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain in order to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan and Japan. TESOL Quarterly 38(2): 245–78.


