The TOEFL Trump Card: An Investigation of Test Impact in an ESL Classroom

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Much of the research on the effects of tests on foreign and second-language classrooms has examined the impact or washback effect that commercial/institutional language tests, such as the TOEFL, have on teachers’ instructional practices (Hughes, 1998; Wall & Alderson, 1993). Using a case study methodology, this study uncovered the ways in which the classroom practices of one teacher and his students interact with their perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL—specifically, the extent to which they view the TOEFL as an accurate measure of English language proficiency. The findings indicate that a great deal of tension and ambiguity surround the TOEFL’s status as an accurate measure of English language proficiency. Both the instructor and his students described the TOEFL as “full of tricks” and believed that the variety of English tested was not the variety of English used in day-to-day interactions with native speakers of English. However, the teacher allowed the institutional authority of the TOEFL to trump his native speaker intuitions and when students’ TOEFL scores did not match their actual classroom performance, he allowed the TOEFL to trump his judgments about their English language proficiency. The conclusions suggest that TESL/TEFL programs adopt a more critical view of high-stakes tests and the ways these critical views might clash with institutional policies so that ESL teachers are better prepared to encounter such tensions in their careers.

In recent years a growing number of scholars in applied linguistics have taken an interest in the real-life consequences of language tests for teachers, students, material writers, curriculum developers, and a myriad of other stakeholders. According to Shohamy (1999) critical language testing recognizes that tests have gained extraordinary power worldwide because they are used to: ac-
cept some students into programs while rejecting others; hire and promote individuals in a work environment; allocate funds to certain schools and programs and cut funding for others; award licenses, certifications, and diplomas. Gone are the days when tests could be seen “as isolated events, detached from people, society, motives, intentions, uses, impacts, effects, and consequences” (Shohamy, 2001 p. 4).

Tests in general, and high-stakes tests in particular, are believed to have a tremendous impact on what goes on in the classroom, affecting what and how teachers teach and what and how students learn (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996). The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the TOEFL in an intensive English language classroom, with particular attention given to one teacher’s and his students’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL and the ways these perceptions manifested themselves in his instructional practices. Our findings suggest that a complex interaction occurred between the participants’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL and the larger institutional and social forces that have long ascribed considerable authority to the TOEFL. Tension resulted between the teacher’s professional knowledge of language pedagogy, language proficiency, and his own assessments of his students’ abilities on the one hand, and his students’ performance on the TOEFL on the other hand; we found that this tension was largely resolved through an implicit acceptance of the TOEFL as the ultimate trump card.

**Language testing washback**

Concerns regarding the power of tests, their gate-keeping functions, and the social consequences of testing have led to an explosion of research in applied linguistics (and in educational psychology and testing more generally) since the late 1980s (Spolsky, 1997). Some of this research has been theoretical and has dealt with the properties of the tests themselves and the ethics involved in the interpretation of test scores, resulting in an expansion of the construct of validity (Messick, 1989). In language testing, Bachman and Palmer (1996) have explored the issue of test impact and distinguished two levels at which this impact is realized: an individual level that focuses on the lives of those who are directly affected by the use of a test (e.g., students, job candidates, immigrants) and a system level that is concerned with the larger effects of a test on the system of education or on society as a whole. These authors suggest that a test’s impact upon the processes of teaching and learning—processes, they point out, that are at work at both the individual and system levels—constitute its washback effect.

To date, a number of L2 studies have been devoted to the washback effect of tests, including Wall and Alderson (1993), Hughes (1988), Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman (1996), Watanabe (1996), and Wall (2000). In addition, two papers (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996) have been particularly important in determining how washback is theorized and investigated. In an early exploratory study, Alderson and Wall (1993) characterize washback simply as the phenomenon in which “testing influences teaching” (p. 115) and
subsequently propose a number of hypotheses regarding how washback can occur and what and whom a test may affect. Building on this work, Bailey (1996) developed a washback model to represent the various participants, processes, and products that both affect and are affected by tests. She argues, for example, that the kinds of activities privileged by the test may not coincide with examinees’ language-learning experiences in and out of the classroom, with the result that two distinct goals emerge: earning a high score on the test and learning the language. Ideally, of course, these two goals should be neither distinct nor competing; in reality, though, this competition remains. Bailey suggests that positive washback can be brought about by aligning assessments with language-learning goals and making assessment tasks more authentic.

Much of the research on the washback effect of tests on teaching and learning has emphasized changes in instructional practices—including the techniques, activities, and assignments that teachers use to prepare students for tests—following the introduction of a test into an educational system (e.g., Hughes, 1988; Wall & Alderson, 1993; Freedman, 1995). The present study, however, was designed to examine the way one teacher’s instructional practices are shaped by the beliefs and perceptions he holds about high-stakes tests. In other words, what can a teacher’s instructional practices reveal to us about his perceptions of the validity of a high-stakes test such as the TOEFL? Thus, an approach which incorporates methods for uncovering beliefs about the validity of the TOEFL is central to this study.

Beliefs, as a psychological construct, however, are neither easily defined nor studied. Cognitive psychology defines beliefs as one’s representation of reality that guides both thought and behavior (Abelson, 1979). Rokeach (1968) describes a belief system, “as having represented within it, in some organized psychological but not necessarily logical form, each and every one of a person’s countless beliefs about physical and social reality” (p. 2). Moreover, he concludes that beliefs contain cognitive, affective, and behavioral components and, therefore, act as influences on what one knows, feels, and does.

A similar characterization is given in educational research where teachers’ beliefs are thought to have a filtering effect on all aspects of their thoughts, judgments, and decisions (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Johnson, 1994, Munby, 1982; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Thus, teachers’ beliefs appear to be instrumental in shaping the way teachers interpret what goes on in their classrooms and how they will react and respond to events and behaviors. However, beliefs cannot merely be observed but instead must be inferred by what individuals say, intend, and do. In this study, therefore, the investigation into one teacher’s and his students’ beliefs entailed inferring beliefs and perceptions not only from the statements that they made about their beliefs, but also by examining their intentionality to behave in a particular way, and then the way this intentionality interacted with what they actually did during classroom instruction.

While a variety of methods have been followed in research on washback, Hawkey (2002) argues that use of a ‘mixed-methods’ approach to data collect-
tion and analysis holds the most promise for washback research. In his view, careful attention must be paid to precisely what is happening in language classrooms if existing washback models and hypotheses are to be validated. In this regard, descriptive qualitative data have the advantage of offering in-depth insights into the interrelationships of a number of variables that play a role in washback. Moreover, since teachers’ beliefs appear to play a critical role in determining what and how teachers teach, this study was designed to examine a teacher’s and his students’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL in order to understand its washback effect. Thus, this study examined the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the participants in this study view the TOEFL as an accurate measure of English language proficiency?
2. How do perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL impact upon instructional practices in this classroom?

Methodology

The instructional context

The data were collected at an intensive English language program at a large mid-Atlantic university in the U. S. This program offers classes in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and grammar for non-university-matriculated international students. The program enrolls three broad groups of English language learners: 1) students interested in going on to pursue undergraduate or graduate studies in the U. S., 2) university students and/or business professionals coming to the US to learn English, and 3) visiting scholars and spouses of current students who need to learn English and maintain student status for visa purposes.

The instructional program is organized into four levels: beginner (Level 1), low-intermediate (Level 2), high-intermediate (Level 3) and advanced (Level 4). In order to be promoted to the next level, students must either have the recommendation of their teachers OR a combination of TOEFL/Michigan test scores and an adequate writing sample. In order to advance to Level 2 from Level 1, for instance, students need a writing sample adequate for Level 2 and a 55 on the Michigan test. To move to Level 3, students need a 460 on the paper TOEFL or a 140 on the computer-based TOEFL in addition to their Level-3-appropriate writing sample, and in order to move to level four, students must score a 510/180 on TOEFL and complete a writing sample. One crucially important aspect of the program’s promotion policy is that the TESOL/Michigan test scores can outweigh or trump the assessment decisions of individual teachers in the program.

The teacher

The teacher (pseudonym Mark) in this study is an experienced instructor of ESL. He holds an MA in TESL and has taught both abroad and in the USA at both the high school and university levels. He has held his current position for
twelve years and has received a number of awards for his teaching. Most recently he received the 2000-2001 Outstanding Teacher of the Year award at his institution. When the researchers approached the institution with their research proposal, the full-time faculty agreed that Mark was the best choice for the study since he ‘officially’ dedicated class time to TOEFL preparation – other instructors at the institution incorporated the TOEFL into their lessons less frequently and in a less systematic manner. The schedule at this institution alternated so that Mark’s Level 3 class met every other Friday, and Mark dubbed these Friday class meetings “TOEFL Fridays.” Since he was the only instructor to set aside a specific time for TOEFL preparation, the full-time faculty felt his participation would allow the researchers to ensure they could observe ESL classes that were designated both “TOEFL” and “non-TOEFL.”

**Data collection procedures**

A case-study methodology was selected as the most appropriate research design for this study (Stake, 1995). While case studies do not allow for broad generalizations about phenomena under study, they do allow access to more finely detailed data leading to rich descriptions of participants’ perspectives. Such data are important when one seeks to describe participants’ beliefs about particular issues, because the major themes that emerge in participant behavior are often only visible through in-depth analyses of what participants do and how they talk about what they do over time.

Data were collected over a two-month period. All classroom observations took place with the same Level 3 (high-intermediate) class. One teacher and 8 students participated. The data collected were of several types. First, four classroom sessions were observed—three TOEFL-specific classes and one non-TOEFL-specific class. A TOEFL-specific class was defined by this particular teacher as one in which the primary emphasis of class activity was practicing skills and techniques useful for TOEFL preparation as opposed to more general English-proficiency-related topics.

Each of these video recorded lessons had a follow-up session approximately four days later in which Mark and the researcher met for a stimulated recall session. During each session, Mark watched the videotape of the previous class session, stopping the tape periodically at self-selected points to remark on what he or the students were doing or to comment on things he was thinking about. In addition, the researcher also stopped the tape when she had specific questions about certain instructional practices. Both Mark and the researcher’s comments were video recorded. Toward the end of the data collection period, a forum or roundtable discussion was held with the students in the class to find out their perceptions of and reactions to the TOEFL and their teacher’s TOEFL-specific classroom sessions. One student (pseudonym “Noelle”) also shared her views about the TOEFL and described her preparations for it in a lengthy individual interview session with the researcher. All these data (observational field notes,
stimulated recall sessions and corresponding class session data segments, student forum, and student interview) were transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis**

The data analyses employed in this study were based on the principles of ethnographic semantics in which the meanings that people gave to their verbal expressions were the primary focus of investigation (Spradley, 1979; Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). The constant comparative method was used to develop an understanding of the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). Based on a grounded content analysis (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992), patterns and themes that emerged from the data were identified, compared, and then coded into tentative conceptual categories (Erickson, 1973). In our analysis, instructional practices were operationally defined as the activities that the teacher and his students engaged in as well as how the teacher and his students were constructed by those activities. Throughout the iterative process of data reduction, verification, and further data analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1984) the themes that emerged focused on the teacher’s beliefs about the TOEFL, the nature of the teacher’s instructional practices used to carry out TOEFL-related activities, and his perceptions of his students’ English language proficiency. In addition, themes emerged that characterized the way students’ beliefs about the TOEFL shaped their perceptions of their own English language proficiency.

**Results**

As stated above, this research focused on understanding perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL in an intensive English language classroom and the impact which a teacher’s and his students’ perceptions of the TOEFL had on instructional practices. Through examining not only what the participants said about the TOEFL but also what they did with regard to the TOEFL, we were able to identify several themes. In what follows, we first draw on interview data to characterize the teacher’s perceptions of the TOEFL and then, relying on the videotaped classroom sessions, we provide evidence of how the teacher’s perceptions were evident in his instruction. We then consider statements made by the teacher and by two of his students that reveal an unstated ‘trumping’ authority granted to the TOEFL such that the test determines in large part how the teacher ‘constructs’ his students’ English proficiency and how he ‘constructs’ himself as a language teacher.

**Perceptions of the TOEFL and classroom practice**

Our analysis of the interview data revealed that the teacher, Mark, was well aware of the TOEFL, its format, and the importance it has for his students. Moreover, Mark had very clear beliefs regarding the validity of the TOEFL. In particular, his comments indicated that: 1) he believes the TOEFL to be filled with ‘tricks’ that are designed to lead examinees to incorrect answers, and 2) the
variety of English that examinees must know to succeed on the TOEFL does not always correspond to everyday language use; thus, examinees must be very careful when relying upon their linguistic intuitions. These perceptions were further corroborated through analysis of the videotaped classroom sessions, in which we found that Mark had developed a repertoire of instructional practices that matched his beliefs about the TOEFL and what he believed it took to achieve a high TOEFL score.

**TOEFL “tricks”**

Throughout the data collection period, Mark consistently referred to the TOEFL as “tricky” and “filled with tricks,” and he claimed that “in the world of the TOEFL, it is the tricks you need to know.” He also compared the TOEFL to “doing a crossword puzzle,” “a word puzzle” or “playing a game.” Interestingly, Mark also pointed out that his students share his belief that the TOEFL is “filled with tricks” as well. In the second stimulated recall session, he noted:

M: yeah, yeah, like I had one student who said, “no, no, with TOEFL what I’d really like is just the tricks. I don’t need the English. I just want the tricks.” Of course, the only thing is that you don’t understand the tricks, if there are some, until you get the English but she wanted to get the tricks without the English.

Whether talking about the TOEFL in general or discussing a specific test item, Mark was consistent in the way he characterized the TOEFL. He explained:

M: uh because a good TOEFL question is one that, you know, leads you in the wrong direction, what’s right looks wrong, what’s wrong looks right. Uh shouldn’t limit yourself to studying TOEFL things to learn your English. In English a lot of things look right that ARE right, or they look wrong and they ARE wrong. But in the world of TOEFL it’s the trick sort of exception to the rules that’s really important. … It’s the mistakes that they are trying to get you to make that are important, not how far you go.

We see in the above quote that for Mark, the prominence of tricks on the TOEFL was significant because it established that learning English and studying for the TOEFL were not identical activities. This became apparent in an instructional strategy that Mark referred to as “finding the problem, but not fixing it.” Here Mark indicated that attempting to correct a mistake was a more efficient learning practice for general (or non-TOEFL) English use but cautioned that doing so might distract a TOEFL examinee and cause her performance to be less efficient. Therefore, for Mark, simply identifying a problem or error was sufficient for the purposes of test preparation and was the most effective way to avoid being ‘tricked’ by the TOEFL. During the observed classroom sessions,
this occurred most often when the class was working on items taken from the Structure and Written Expression section of the TOEFL. Sometimes an item provided an incomplete sentence and the student was expected to select from four possible choices to make the sentence correct. Other items provided sentences with four underlined words or phrases and the student was expected to identify which of the four underlined words or phrases must be changed in order for the sentence to be grammatically correct. During one classroom session, Mark told the class:

M: First of all, in TOEFL, you always have to mark this answer. You don’t have to fix it, you just have to point to the problem. But over here I’m asking you how would you rewrite this sentence so that you get the appropriate meaning? Any suggestions?
Ss: (inaudible)
M: well her suggestion is really great

Interestingly, in the second part of this excerpt, Mark indicated that outside of the TOEFL, he expected the students to “fix” the problem so that they understood it. However, later in this same stimulated recall we hear him struggle with the fact that he wants his students to develop a “habit of repair” so that they can articulate why an item is wrong, but he seems to believe that this process won’t necessarily help them on the TOEFL.

M: well, that’s something that happens when going through these exercises, because I like to say okay what would you really do but then there’s a price to pay, because if they’re doing a TOEFL and they have B chosen and they don’t know how they’d fix it, it doesn’t mean it’s the wrong answer, it means they’re wasting their time they should be going to the next, the next item.
R: mmm
M: and so really by asking them what the proper, what the proper form would be, it’s good for grammar but it’s not what they have to do in TOEFL, and so if it develops that habit of repair then it’s not gonna help’em. As much as I’d like, it’s gonna hurt’em ’cause they’ll be using that as a criteria for their answers.

In another classroom session, Mark explains to his class that the TOEFL will also try to trick them by providing superfluous information that they do not need to understand a text they are reading or hearing. Consider the following in which Mark and his students are reviewing a TOEFL listening comprehension passage.

M: Yeah, this is interesting. What happens with TOEFL as you know, um TOEFL will use names to confuse your-your thinking like later on we had
these sentences about the Ford Volari or the Plymouth Volari and the Ford whatever it is, all of these words are here to confuse you a little bit.

After watching this videotaped excerpt, Mark described a strategy that he believes can help students deal with TOEFL tricks:

M: I guess it- it’s really good if they can keep the abstract meaning of the sentence regardless if it’s Ron or Mark or uh-…and I think the problem really asks if they can keep-keep track of the relationship without knowing all the words themselves.

In addition to keeping track of the relationships between persons and things, Mark recognized that the options listed in the test’s multiple-choice format could also trick examinees. He thus focused students’ attention on “knowing where to look” for answers to TOEFL questions. Sometimes Mark told the students to “look in the distractors” while other times he suggested they look in the passage. This strategy was used when it appeared that the students had become stuck or were not taking full advantage of the clues given elsewhere in the passage.

M: …that when people have problems with language, sometimes they— they look for the easy solution. But it’s not really where the problem is. And if they’re not finding it where they think it is, ah they should go some-where else...

“Knowing where to look” also became an instructional strategy if students were faced with a word or an error they had never seen before. In these cases, Mark encouraged them to “try to find alternatives”

M: … with this, if they look at the sentence and they don’t see the problem, they need to have been there before
R: mm hmm
M: faced with it, so now what? And the, and then try to find alternatives. At least look under different stones and logs and things.

Moreover, Mark seemed to feel that the TOEFL tries to trick students by providing choices that are all very similar, another way in which the test differentiates itself from real language use. There were many occasions when Mark suggested the students should analyze TOEFL answers to “look for the most wrong answer”, the “least right answer”, or “the worst of the choices.” For example, after talking about what he called unnecessary repetition in a reading comprehension passage, such as, ‘it was red in color’ or ‘he wore shoes on his feet’, Mark told the class:
M: …you may read these things but once it comes time to do a TOEFL you have to look for trouble, here is one. Yeah. Good… Is it wrong? (sighs loudly) not really, but again, you don’t always choose wrong answers on TOEFL, you just choose of the four choices, you take the worst.

After watching this videotaped excerpt, Mark reflected on how students typically approached the choices given after each reading comprehension question and indicated:

M: …they are looking for the right answer, a lotta time there’s not gonna be a right answer for—they just have to look for the one that – and I say that especially in the reading part but here too, you just have to look for the one that’s closest and if they can get comfortable with putting down an answer that’s the wrong answer, but the best one given…but I think sometimes those are really some of the trickier questions because they have to discriminate between more or less…

The TOEFL vs. ‘real’ language use

Mark’s distinction between the world of the TOEFL and the real world became even sharper in his comments concerning the kind of English privileged by the TOEFL. He often talked about the TOEFL as having “no context, but in ‘real’ language use, you ‘get it’ mostly from the context” adding that the TOEFL “stresses details and accuracy while ‘real’ language use stresses general meanings.” While reflecting on a student’s questions about a listening passage, Mark recalled:

M: If they don’t have their ears ready to hear all this detail, then they’re likely to miss the—the subtleties, and subtleties is where the whole thing is with TOEFL. In real life they can guess through with that with the-uh context a little bit better.

These data suggest, however, that Mark does believe that ‘real’ language experiences are beneficial for TOEFL preparation, as we see when he tells students that only about 80% of what is on the TOEFL can be explained by grammar rules. However, he prefaces his comments with a warning about the intent of the TOEFL to trick students into relying on a particular rule, when in fact, the exception to the rule may be used in a test item:

M: Now there are the ones TOEFL will choose. They will choose the ones that are LY but are really an adjective because they try to trick you, so how can you tell (dramatic sigh). You’re looking for a simple answer. It’s um, you know, one thing I like to say is um, that in um, maybe eighty percent you can cover with rules, sometimes I think it’s less but up here, you need experience in the language and sometimes the TOEFL takes more of its
questions from experience than they do from the ones that strictly follow the rules, I don’t know.

Despite the need for students to have “‘real’ language experiences” Mark recognizes that “the TOEFL is an academic test.” He explicitly warns the students that “TOEFL English is not real English” and thus any real language experiences that they may have had can also work against them when they are taking the TOEFL.

For example, during an instructional activity from the Structure and Written Expression section of the TOEFL, Mark first described what parallel structures are, and then reminded a student that she should be careful when relying on “what sounds good” and that she should base her intuitions on academic English or “TOEFL English” rather than on her own language experiences:

M: …so what you wanna do with this kind of parallelism is make sure that the structure after the ‘either’ is built the same way as after the ‘or’, Good. Noelle: (inaudible)
M: Noelle, since you’re putting so much—and that’s good—so much in – in what sounds good, then you have to learn what sounds good.

After watching this excerpt on videotape, Mark recalled
M: … if they develop then their idea of what sounds good but um, they start the academic what sounds good, and then there’s the me and my brother went to the store sounds good
R: Mm hm.
M: so I think when Noelle talks a lot to native speakers, she does learn a lot of English, but um I think its dormitory English really
R: yh huh
M: instead of TOEFL English.

Interestingly, Mark saw “‘real’ English” or what he referred to as “dormitory English” as inappropriate for the TOEFL or in academic settings. Thus, he remained concerned that an over-reliance on “dormitory English” would actually hinder students’ ability to do well on the TOEFL.

M: and a lotta times they – in which case the TOEFL kinds of questions wouldn’t really match up with these conversational, what I call dormitory-type talk kind of a thing.
R: so dormitory talk is not the experience that you’re talking about here?
M: Not in this case. I guess I’m thinking about what’s right, wrong, is determined by experience. If they say, “me and Linda went out,” I guess you do well for in-group cohesion but not very well for TOEFL.
R: yeah
M: but I think that’s appropriate because TOEFL is an academic test and
people who aren't headed in academic directions wouldn't be excited about TOEFL anyway. No, I just mean idioms and word forms and uh...I'm not sure if the way people really talk is what's (laughs) is what students should be studying...and I guess it has to be.

R: mm hmm

M: 'cause it's the real language, but, but when we look at what I call dormitory talk or the way students really talk, I don't think they use that version of the language when they're writing a term paper

R: mm humm

M: and I also think this kind of hyper formalized prepares them for classroom term papers and they're probably not gonna be uh swearing with other native speakers and telling dirty jokes and doing the kinds of things that people that talk that sort of dormitory talk are.

Mark often referred to the importance of knowing “what sounds good.” This apparent reference to the development of native-speaker intuition seemed to indicate his belief that ‘real’ language use can, in fact, benefit students who are preparing for the TOEFL. However, he also wondered if knowing “what sounds good” is really enough for students to pass the TOEFL, since they may, as he indicates below, not really “know it.” “Knowing it” in the context of TOEFL preparation seemed to suggest one’s ability to use and produce language, especially in writing. For example in this stimulated recall session, Mark describes the dilemma faced by a student who has developed a sense of knowing “what sounds good” but is using her “dormitory English” to make her decisions, something he believes will create difficulties for her on the TOEFL.

M: She knows what sounds right and um she doesn’t always get the sound right, but everybody should be so lucky as to have most of their grammar tied up in what sounds right. But she’s not terribly accurate when she talks or when she writes [either] so um I guess the other questions would be if you know if somebody depends on it sounding right, does this really mean that they know it? You know, in a written form, a productive form.

The TOEFL and the construction of native-speaker intuition and language proficiency

Despite the characterization that emerged of Mark’s perceptions of the TOEFL, a critical analysis of several instructional episodes revealed evidence of: 1) how Mark’s perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL manifest themselves in the way he constructed his own native speaker judgments, 2) how he constructed two of his students (henceforth, Noelle and Joon) based on discrepancies between their classroom performance and their TOEFL scores, and 3) how Noelle and Joon constructed their own English language proficiency in light of discrepancies between their classroom performance and TOEFL scores.
Constructing a teacher: Mark’s native-speaker intuitions vs. the TOEFL

One incident in particular offered some insights into the way the TOEFL affected Mark’s perceptions of his own native-speaker intuitions. After completing a sample TOEFL reading comprehension test, Mark first asked the class for their reactions to one of the reading passages, and the students replied that the passage was difficult and that they hadn’t had enough time to answer the questions. Mark then asked for a general summary of the passage and followed this summary with some specific questions. The task was to decide which of the four choices they were given was most synonymous with the word *denounced*. Mark stated that the answer was *insult*, but the students argued that the word *condemn*, also one of the options, was better. Mark attempted to explain the meanings of these three words in relation to one another but failed to satisfy the students, and they continued to argue about which word was most appropriate for the test item in question. The students’ discussion spilled over into the class break-time as they continued to talk about the meanings of these words, and eventually referred to a Korean/English dictionary. Mark, however, stood by his native speaker intuitions and explained again that *insult* was the right answer. After the break, however, it was clear that Mark had backed off from his stance; after he checked the TOEFL answer key, he returned to the classroom and informed the students that he had consulted the TOEFL answer key and admitted they were right, “‘denounce’ is closer to ‘condemn’ rather ‘insult’… to condemn is to do harm and insult can just be words.”

After watching this videotaped excerpt, Mark recalled:

M: and they were so sure I was wrong, and by gosh, they were right! I was wrong
R: mm hm
M: and it was very, um ah, just very positive that they, that they, yeah, that’s right
R: they were so committed to
M: yeah, yeah, you’re, you’re right, in the end, the whole thing was, was a positive one, although it was – I’m expendable, but you know what I mean
R: mm hm
M: …No, I realize there were some good things from it, I just felt a little sheepish from the whole thing to begin with but uh, yeah, I know, I’m over it, I didn’t think about it much, but still, if you have the choice,
R: right, right

Clearly, Mark’s self-confidence was shaken by this episode. He mentioned the episode several times during the stimulated recall interview, and his facial expressions belied his chagrin in being proved wrong. Later in the same stimulated recall session he returned to this episode recalling, “so I figured okay, here’s the native speaker, I’m the one who’s supposed to, you know, show ‘em
what they should’ve done, you know.” It’s clear from this statement that he is at least questioning whether or not his native speaker intuitions are reliable sources of information. And still later in this stimulated recall session, he continued to reflect on this episode and recalled:

M: well… (laughs) … I don’t know why I got onto that track and I, I’m not really gonna think about it much more but uh, at that point, from that emotional standpoint, I did think that was the answer, now ah if I, if I’m gonna mess this up sometimes, to me, that’s a better alternative than to just push the answer and, and I think it’s so much more important to, to do the questions without the answer key.

Once again, we see evidence of Mark’s perception of the validity of the TOEFL, in that in this instance, he was willing to assume that the TOEFL was correct and that he, a native-speaker of English, was incorrect. While we recognize that Mark’s original answer was in fact incorrect, we believe that the insight this episode offers is the fact that he did not believe he was wrong until he checked the TOEFL answer key. In fact, before checking the answer key, Mark even asked the researcher which answer she felt was right, and when she agreed with the students, he argued with her and appeared skeptical about her answer. It wasn’t until he checked the TOEFL answer key that he was willing to accept that his answer might be wrong. That is, while his students (and their dictionary) and the researcher (and her native speaker intuitions) were not sufficient to trump Mark’s confidence in the correctness of his own response, the TOEFL answer key was. For Mark, ‘condemn’ is the correct response to this practice item not because the majority was able to convince him, a dictionary supported his students’ position, or another highly literate native speaker indicated agreement, but because it is correct according to the TOEFL answer key.

Once again, while Mark consistently characterizes the TOEFL as “not real English,” he is willing to deny his own native-speaker intuitions and allow the TOEFL answer key to ‘trump’ his own judgments. And once again, he did not seem uncomfortable with these contradictions, but rather managed them by deciding in the future to complete this sort of activity without the TOEFL answer key, thus, avoiding the possibility of finding that his intuitions may be trumped by answers listed in the TOEFL answer key.

Constructing a student: TOEFL score vs. actual classroom language performance—The case of Joon

The significance of Joon to the present study is that her case illustrates the power of the TOEFL to trump Mark’s own evaluation of his students’ language abilities, and as we will argue, this case demonstrates the way a student’s TOEFL score can impact how she is viewed by her classroom instructor. Joon is a Korean woman who was enrolled in Mark’s Level 3 class. She is in her 30s and had a successful career in Korea before coming to the U. S. Her goal in at-
tending this English language program was to gain entrance into a graduate program at the university. Joon’s history at this institution is worth discussing. During the semester preceding data collection for this study, Joon had been enrolled in Level 2 classes. At the end of that semester, Joon’s instructors reviewed her classroom performance and decided she should remain in Level 2. However, Joon had taken the TOEFL and her score was high enough for her to advance to Level 3. Thus, following institutional policy, the judgment of Joon’s teachers was overridden by her TOEFL score, and Joon enrolled in Mark’s Level 3 class.

During a stimulated recall session, Mark voiced the concerns he and his colleagues had regarding her promotion to his Level 3 class. What is interesting in the following excerpt is Mark’s tacit acceptance of the TOEFL as a more accurate assessment of Joon’s English abilities than the evaluation of her classroom teachers who had worked with her daily over several months:

M: She’s an odd one because uh that particular students was…last semester she didn’t do very well in the Reading II and all the Level II classes and we were basically gonna make her repeat the whole thing and then she turned out with the, turned up with this really good TOEFL score, which amazed everybody. So because she got the TOEFL score, she, in a sense was in charge of her own promotion.
R: mm hm
M: and she moved up to Level 3 – but we tried to talk her out of going to 3 but she was sure she needed to go to Level 3.
R: uh huh
M: so what I mean is, that she’d got contradictions in her language learning and uh w-what that tells us right away is that uh we can’t trust ourselves (laughs) to read her, you know we just have to allow her to, to wander through and hang on the best we can.
R: mm hm
M: but when we do talk about things, I do try to tell her exactly what I think. You know, you, you’re talking, that’s good, you’re not so clear but please keep trying, don’t worry about us, you know, keep pushing it through, I’ll try to, you know, I dunno
R: mm hm do you think it was, it was a mistake for her to move up to Level 3?
M: No, no, I think it’s exactly what she needed, but I, I felt that as teachers living with her for a whole semester, grading exam after exam, each exam confirming the idea that she really wasn’t doing well
R: mm hm
M: and then suddenly having her do well on the TOEFL, which is even more unusual. Um, it-it’s in a way it’s to her credit as well as sort of humbling to us, to, to realize we really don’t know how much English she knows despite all the data we collected all semester
Of course, it is important to bear in mind that the institution where Mark works has a publicly stated placement policy that a TOEFL score can trump teacher placement decisions. The institutional culture and tradition of granting ultimate authority to the TOEFL can help explain Mark’s conclusion that Joon’s poor classroom performance did not indicate low English proficiency. In fact, the discrepancy between Joon’s abilities as seen in class and her abilities as evidenced by her TOEFL score led Mark to view her in a different light.

During the stimulated recall sessions, Mark stated several times that he continued to have difficulty understanding Joon’s spoken language in class and often noticed errors in her written English. He further admitted to feeling very frustrated with what he described as his inability to understand Joon well enough to even answer her questions or to respond appropriately, although he continued to encourage her attempts to participate in class. However, it is Mark’s response to these communication problems that is noteworthy. His comments suggest that he sees himself as partially at fault for not being able to understand Joon:

M: but I haven’t been able to do it when I want to, because she hasn’t quite come to the threshold of me being able to understand what it is. You think I’d be able to after all this time.
R: well, if her attempts are limited, maybe not.
M: you’d think listening to foreign student questions, I’d be able to put it together but she’s so convoluted

In this way, Mark recasts the failed communication in such a way that he acknowledges that Joon is “convoluted” and that she has not “come to the threshold” of comprehensibility, but at the same time he implicates himself as failing to comprehend her. He is not “able to understand” or “able to put it together,” and as an ESL teacher, he clearly appears to expect that he should be able to make sense of what she is saying.

These remarks stand in stark contrast to Mark’s earlier appraisal of Joon. Indeed, as a Level 2 student, Joon’s poor classroom performance was taken as a valid indicator of her relatively low English proficiency. Her higher-than-expected TOEFL score changed this perception, and Mark began to construct her as a more competent speaker of English than he had previously thought. Just as in her Level 2 class, Joon’s English was still largely incomprehensible to Mark, and yet he was no longer comfortable seating her with the failure by simply concluding that her oral proficiency was low – for Mark, her TOEFL score had proven that this could not be the case. Instead, he seemed to feel obligated to share the responsibility when their communication broke down:

M: oh yeah, yeah, and I’m pleased with how she’s doing, um, but ah … see, that’s another thing, when I look at her homework, she’s not always accurate. Um, she doesn’t always give me what I wanted her to give me. And
now remembering what happened before then I, I sort of have to say, well, (laughs)), is it possible to see this from her point of view, you know.

R: ah hah

M: does she really mean more than she says or is there something there? So, not, she’s not that precise yet, but, but it did amaze me she did well on the TOEFL and it did sort of uh disappoint me in myself that I wasn’t able to see that ’cause I can usually, I usually think that where the student’s at again and when they don’t do well, we know that well, they’re not doing their best work

R: mm hm

M: now here I am thinking that she was doing her best work and it wasn’t very good and then she proved me wrong.

Mark’s perception of the validity of the TOEFL, despite daily contradictory evidence, resonates with Shannon’s (1983, 1987, 1989) research on the way L1 reading teachers come to equate commercial reading materials with scientific methods of reading instruction, and thus, hold strong beliefs in the power of commercial materials. Shannon argues that in the Western world, where science and technology are highly valued, teachers and administrators have come to assume that the materials themselves are what actually teach children to read and represent the technological solution to the problems of reading instruction. Consequently, L1 reading teachers rely heavily on commercial materials to guide and sometimes control their instructional practices. This sort of reification of scientific principles, Shannon claims, causes teachers to subconsciously alienate themselves from their responsibilities as teachers, as they become managers of the commercial materials rather than facilitators of the learning process according to students’ instructional needs.

The above discussion suggests that Mark’s institution—and by extension Mark himself—has reified the scientific principles believed to be embedded in commercially available tests, such as the TOEFL, to the extent that Mark has become willing to subjugate his own professional judgments to the TOEFL’s. The case of Joon illustrates that for Mark, the TOEFL is better able to judge a student’s English proficiency than he is. And we hear evidence that he decided to “allow her to, to wander through and hang on the best we can” suggesting he is willing to subjugate is own professional judgments about Joon’s English language proficiency because of a higher than expected TOEFL score. While this implied endorsement of the TOEFL stands in opposition to Mark’s beliefs that the TOEFL is simply “filled with tricks,” “a game,” or that “TOEFL English is not real English,” he did not seem to be bothered by this contradiction. In fact, when asked by the researcher whether he felt that Joon’s placement in Level 3 was appropriate, given her TOEFL score, Mark responded by saying; “No, no, I think it’s exactly what she needed” and that “in a way it’s to her credit.” These statements make a strong case for the ‘trumping’ power of the TOEFL, because
they show how radically a student’s score can—and did—affect her teacher’s confidence in his own assessment of her English language proficiency.

**Constructing a student: TOEFL score vs. actual classroom language performance—The case of Noelle**

A critical analysis of Noelle, an eighteen-year old student from Cyprus, highlights the ways that her perception of the validity of the TOEFL shaped, in large part, the way she constructed herself as a language learner and the way she defined her own proficiency in English in relation to the TOEFL. Noelle’s goal during her tenure in this language program was to earn a high enough TOEFL score to be admitted to an American university to study Speech Pathology. She initially took the TOEFL just before leaving for the US and, much to her surprise, was unable to obtain the minimum score required by the university where she intended to study. In Cyprus, Noelle had done much of her formal education in English. In fact, at her school, English was a subject of study as well as the medium of instruction for certain subjects (e.g., music and art). To improve her TOEFL score, Noelle enrolled in the intensive English language program and was placed in Mark’s class. For her, as for many other international students, the TOEFL is an extremely high-stakes test. Noelle had registered to take the TOEFL again at the end of the course, and if her scores were not high enough for her to be admitted for full-time university study she would return home to Cyprus and explore other options for her post-secondary education.

In class, Noelle was a student whom Mark described as enthusiastic but who also did “so many things without thinking,” and had a tendency to “shoot from the hip” and to “take so many pot shots.” She was an outgoing student and participated very actively in class—so much so that in one stimulated recall, Mark remarked that she had “been talking almost the whole class.” Noelle was often the first to offer an answer, and both she and Mark had a great deal of confidence in her English. In particular, Mark noted her ability to rely on a kind of intuition when she was speaking, and Noelle herself claimed that she had many opportunities to speak English outside of class, since she had an American roommate and that she spent a good deal of time watching American television programs and movies.

It is interesting to note at this point that both Noelle and Mark considered her scores on the TOEFL to be fairly low. The fact that she was still in Level 3 indicates that she had not yet achieved a 510 on the paper-based TOEFL or a 180 on the computer-based TOEFL. In the passage below, Mark was attempting to explain why Noelle’s TOEFL scores could have been so low despite her fluency and facility with the language.

M: so I think when Noelle talks a lot to native speakers, she does learn a lot of English, but um I think it’s dormitory English really
R: uh huh
M: *instead of TOEFL English.*
Mark, then, explained Noelle’s low TOEFL score by distinguishing the kind of English she was learning from the kind necessary to receive a high TOEFL score. For Mark, then, it was possible for Noelle to be successful communicating and interacting with both native and nonnative speakers of English but not successful on the TOEFL.

Noelle concurred with this assessment; in an interview, she agreed that a person could have high grades and good performance in an ESL class but still receive a low TOEFL score. In her case, this was due, at least in part, to the prominent role of grammar on the TOEFL. When describing her previous experience taking the TOEFL, Noelle admitted, “The grammar scared me a lot. It’s the worst part for me.” In fact, while discussing ways the TOEFL could be improved, she said the test would be better if it had a speaking component. When asked to explain her reasoning, she simply responded, “Because I am awful in grammar, but I am very good at speaking.” In her ESL classes, she claimed that she was more successful in situations that allowed her to rely on her communicative abilities in English rather than her explicit knowledge of grammar.

Noelle also substantiated her claim that students could do well in an ESL class but not on the TOEFL by pointing out that even good English speakers might not perform well on the TOEFL because the test is full of ‘tricks,’ a word used frequently by Mark. At one point, she stated unequivocally “the whole TOEFL is a trick.” Noelle’s use of the word ‘trick’ is particularly interesting, as it closely mirrors Mark’s use of this same term, as we have already discussed.

In fact, Noelle repeatedly used the word ‘tricks’ to reflect her belief that TOEFL questions are designed with some kind of deception in mind, and that the creators of the TOEFL are attempting to lead students to choosing incorrect answers. If Noelle believes that the people designing the TOEFL are out to ‘trick’ students rather than measure their actual abilities in English, it comes as no surprise that she also believes a student could do well in an English class or when speaking English with native speakers and still get a low score on the TOEFL.

However, Noelle’s insistence that a low TOEFL score does not correlate to poor English abilities did not carry over when she was asked whether, then, a student with a high TOEFL score could get poor grades in ESL classes. She avoided answering the question, explaining, “I don’t know about that...” and immediately asserted what she did know: “I know that I am very good in my English class, but my TOEFL wasn’t enough.” In making this statement, Noelle retreated from having to agree that the TOEFL could be so ‘tricky’ that someone with poor English skills could score well, (provided they knew the tricks) to a more comfortable claim that a student with a low TOEFL score could, in fact, be a good student in English classes.

This ambivalence over the meaning of one’s TOEFL score is interesting because it illustrates the extent of Noelle’s struggle with the authority afforded to the TOEFL. On the one hand, Noelle is confident in her own abilities in English
and refuses to allow them to be tempered by her low TOEFL score. Rather than accepting her performance on the TOEFL as an indication of low English proficiency, she continues to believe that her communicative abilities are good and that it is her trouble with grammar that caused her score to be lower than anticipated. In addition, she is resolute in her conviction that the various “tricks” used by TOEFL writers to ‘trap’ students also could produce test scores that do not reflect true language ability. On the other hand, however, she found herself fighting an enormous amount of social and institutional pressure to admit at least that a TOEFL score can—and does—measure some part of students’ success with the language. She finally settled on a compromise of sorts; she denied the fact that a low score on the TOEFL means poor English skills but she refuted the claim that TOEFL scores were completely irrelevant, because she was unwilling to admit that someone with limited English abilities could receive a high score on the TOEFL. It appears that Noelle believes that good English language abilities are a necessary but insufficient condition for doing well on the TOEFL.

Discussion

The authoritative power of the TOEFL

At this juncture, we return to our first research question, which was to what extent do the participants in this study view the TOEFL as an accurate measure of English proficiency? One of the most striking overall findings that emerged from this study is that this teacher, despite his repeated criticism of the TOEFL, still possesses a mostly uncritical acceptance of its authoritative power as a highly accurate indicator of an individual’s English language proficiency. This belief is most likely grounded in the TOEFL’s long history of being endorsed by various institutional authorities and its general recognition in the U. S. as the definitive test of English proficiency. This teacher’s acceptance of the authoritative power of the TOEFL appears to create a sort of subconscious struggle between his professed beliefs: he has affirmed his skepticism of the TOEFL, in terms of what it actually attempts to measure or what students need to know in order to do well, but he also ceded a great deal of authority to the TOEFL as well, in relation to his own professional judgments and expertise as a seasoned English language teacher. This is evidenced in Mark’s unquestioning acceptance of the test’s answer key over his own native speaker intuitions and his privileging of the TOEFL’s assessment of a student over his own assessments.

Interestingly, another striking finding that emerged from the data indicates that students possess a ‘mixed’ acceptance of the TOEFL as an accurate measure of English language proficiency, despite contradictory evidence, both positive and negative, from actual classroom language performance. On the one hand, Joon struggled to express herself clearly during class discussions and often needed to repeat questions several times to be understood, but had moved into this high intermediate class, despite her teachers’ reservations. On the other hand, Noelle, who demonstrated tremendous English language competence in class, but did not do well on the TOEFL concluded that the TOEFL did not re-
flect her proficiency in English yet she was not willing to totally condemn the test as invalid. These findings suggest that students and teachers alike find some measure of English proficiency to be necessary for obtaining a high TOEFL score. Moreover, despite these lingering concerns over the test’s validity, the authoritative power of the TOEFL was sufficient to prompt the teacher to recalibrate his perceptions of his students’ English proficiency to be better aligned with the TOEFL.

The TOEFL and English language teaching

Our exploration of our second research question also highlights the struggle between the teacher’s contradictory perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL. Recall that this research question examined the ways in which perceptions of the TOEFL as a valid test of English proficiency impact upon classroom practices. It seems clear that the answer to this question involves conflicts for the teacher in this study. As we have noted, Mark believed the TOEFL to be filled with ‘tricks’ and claimed that part of the TOEFL’s trickiness was the degree to which it deliberately interfered or interacted with a language learner’s developing linguistic intuitions and skills. For instance, Mark felt that one way the TOEFL could help students learn English was if students were able to take items from the grammar section and correct them, but he also recognized that if they employed this particular strategy while taking the test, it would only serve to “waste their time” and distract them since correcting errors is not an ability assessed by the TOEFL even though it might be useful for language learning. Further, the kind of English students need to know in order to do well on the TOEFL varied in its perceived usefulness. Mark commented extensively on the fact that students need to know “TOEFL English” for school but also recognized that the students who used English with the most facility used it in their lives outside of school and were probably not using “TOEFL English.”

It is evident, then, that this teacher’s choice to use TOEFL materials as English language learning tools was one that was fraught with contradictions. Mark believes that using TOEFL materials will help students who have strengths in spoken English to improve their structural knowledge of English (like Noelle) while at the same time he believes that doing well on the TOEFL (as Joon did) belies some kind of expertise with the language. But these beliefs contradict his assertions that the TOEFL is full of tricks and that students who are good English speakers can do poorly on the TOEFL.

Conclusion

The contradictions this teacher faced are not unusual in the North American world of English language teaching. Like most teachers, Mark’s view of the TOEFL is complex and bound up in the social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which English language teaching takes place (Reagan & Osborn, 2002). We believe that one major implication of this study is that teachers (and students) need to become conscious of the beliefs they hold about the
TOEFL, because these beliefs do in fact influence what and how teachers teach, and the way that teachers and students get constructed. For example, in the present study we see evidence of a teacher’s willingness to subjugate his own professional judgments to the TOEFL’s authority, positioning the test as the ultimate trump card. In this regard, consider Mark’s response to Joon’s surprisingly high TOEFL score: “sort of humbling to us, to, to realize we really don’t know how much English she [Joon] knows despite all the data we collected all semester.” Similarly, we see that the TOEFL can also trump a learner’s actual competencies in English, as in the case of Noelle. Mark’s description of her language abilities is quite telling: “she [Noelle] does learn a lot of English, but um I think it’s dormitory English.” In such instances, teachers’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL have a tremendous impact not only on what and how teachers teach but also on opportunities afforded to students. Based solely on their TOEFL scores, institutional policy allowed Joon to advance to a higher instructional level while Noelle’s score upon arrival at this program was considered inadequate for admission for university study. In both cases, the TOEFL trumped the teacher’s professional judgments about students’ English language proficiency.

Finally, the findings of this study indicate that teachers’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL clearly influence students’ perceptions of the validity of the TOEFL. In this study, the students’ repeated use of the word ‘tricks’ seemed to emerge out of exposure to a semester of hearing a trusted English language/TOEFL authority (i.e., Mark) describe the TOEFL this way. Ultimately, recognizing the TOEFL potential as the ultimate trump card may enable teachers and students to come to terms with the consequences that high-stakes tests can have on second language teaching and learning. The most logical site for these issues to be addressed may be in professional development experiences, such as pre-service and in-service TEFL/ITESL programs. In such sites, informed teacher educators can work to instill critical awareness about the way a teacher’s individual knowledge and the official practices of institutions can conflict with each other, and provide teachers (and students) with appropriate strategies for working through these complex issues.

One final aspect of this study is noteworthy because of its implications for language testing and washback research. One hallmark of washback studies has been to focus data gathering on the behavior of the teacher to see what her or his actions tell us about the degree of influence a test has on her or his instruction. However, this study breaks ground in that it combines a qualitative analysis of an instructor’s teaching behaviors with his own explanations of what he saw happening and why. This approach proved to be a fruitful one, because it revealed this teacher’s internal struggles between what he said and did in class (which would lead any observer to think he allotted very little credibility to the TOEFL) and the seemingly incongruous authority the TOEFL seemed to hold for him in terms of student placement and linguistic intuitions. This contradiction would not have been visible to the researchers without the painstaking, it-
erative process of having the teacher observe his own behaviors and class activities and then explain or describe his instructional decision making to another person.

References
Indigenous Critical Traditions for TEFL?  
A Historical and Comparative Perspective in the Case of Korea

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The possibility of curricular innovation in English teaching in non-Western countries has been questioned on cultural grounds. However, in some cases this may be unjustified; insufficient attention may have been paid to the diversity and extent of the educational traditions that either co-exist, or have existed in the past, in a particular cultural area. Historical and theoretical analyses may suggest greater possibilities to the curriculum developer who devotes attention to these aspects of culture. In this paper, the non-mainstream curricular inheritances within Korean education are discussed, and their resources applied to the question of feasibility of critical pedagogy in a Korean situation. After considering the role of Orientalism in establishing a position of unfeasibility that is not empirically well-grounded, this paper reviews some aspects of the Confucian inheritances common to East Asian countries, which might be inhibitory. The paper argues that the Confucian tradition has more than one side, and other cultural practices, both ancient and more recent mean that critical language curriculum development possibilities could be based on these diverse cultural and historical inheritances in the case of Korea.

Introduction

The last 20 years has seen a substantial movement within second and foreign language studies, increasing in visibility in the last decade, to take up one major radical tradition of education and apply it in discussions of curriculum theory and practice—we refer to critical pedagogy (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; Crawford-Lange, 1981; Pennycook, 1994; Wallerstein, 1983). This is an approach to teaching and curriculum influenced by critical social theory which aims for transformative education (cf. Cummins & Sayer, 1995) to foster the critical and active citizen, and emphasizes a commitment to dialogue between
students and teachers (Freire, 2000). Perhaps like many non-mainstream curriculum ideas, it may be “easier said than done,” and though there is an increasing number of published accounts of its implementation in ESL classrooms we are only just beginning to see its appearance in FL contexts (cf. Reagan & Osborn, 2002; Ohara, Saft, & Crookes, 2000) and accounts of its implementation in EFL contexts outside the West are very few and far between (cf. Canagarajah, 1999; Kramer-Dahl, 2001).

Concurrently, a questioning and/or defensive literature (e.g., Holliday, 1994a; Coleman, 1996; Hu, 2002, Sonaiya, 2002) that considers together issues of language, culture, and curriculum has grown up on the ruins of many attempts to import “innovative” curricula or pedagogic approaches to the instruction of English as a foreign language into non-Western countries. Some scholars (those following the analyses of e.g., Phillipson, 1992) would see such attempts as less than altruistic. This questioning and defensive work aids resistance to intended or unintended cultural imperialism manifested by apparently neutral professional language teaching experts, drawing on what Coleman (1996) calls “autonomous” (by which he means a-cultural) understandings of the language classroom. And one of its major thrusts would be to question the cultural appropriateness of any such importation, advising that cultural inappropriateness would lead to a lack of success. Part of this literature, however, may involve “Orientalizing” tendencies: the projection onto “Eastern” cultures of features that derive initially from Western descriptions or interpretations of them (Kubota, 1999). (Goldstein (2003) illustrates how the legacy of Orientalism and the othering of Asian people, combined with internalization of racism, still finds daily expression in North American classrooms.) And the more explicitly defensive components of this literature assert that certain different approaches are not viable in specific cultures because of the essential characteristics of those cultures or their students (contra Holliday, 1994b).

In the present historical and theoretical paper, while recognizing the progressive intent of much of this work, we want to provide an illustration that will minimize the likelihood that these perspectives might encroach on the possibility of critical curricular initiatives for second or foreign languages in non-Western settings. More specifically, our discussion is intended to discourage resistance to cultural imperialism in language education from being based in Orientalized accounts of non-Western classrooms and educational cultures. We hope to do this by suggesting the existence of an indigenous base for such initiatives (thereby agreeing with the thrust of Holliday and Coleman’s work) while providing evidence with which to question the Orientalized accounts that Kubota has identified. In particular, we take to heart the advice of Coleman (1996, p. 13) that we “examine traditional modes of behavior” and “seek to understand them.”

We take as our focal case educational traditions in Korea. At the present time, this East Asian country is highly driven to learn English as a foreign language (cf. Shin, in press). By comparison with China or Japan, accounts of its educational history and practices are less available in English-medium academic
literature. It certainly has, however, as rich traditions in those areas as the other major East Asian countries, which deserve greater exposure outside a narrow specialist literature. In addition our discussion should contribute to understandings of the wider issues surrounding the “introduction” of “new” ideas in ELT. Accordingly, in this paper, we do theoretical and historical recuperative work toward the possibility of implementing critical second language pedagogies in Korea. We hope this will be seen as a small example of the interaction of language, culture, and curriculum in which we suggest a way to think towards culturally-appropriate forms of critical (language) pedagogy for non-Western contexts. After a review of key concepts of the increasingly popular, “Western” tradition of critical pedagogy, we go on to discuss the cultures of learning in East-Asian countries and their shared philosophical background. We then look for historical and contemporary practices of (educational) activism in Korea, which we argue are congruent with a critical pedagogy.

The culture of learning of Critical Pedagogy

It has been twenty years since the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire began to be adapted to S/FL teaching contexts (Crawford, 1978, Crawford-Lange, 1981). It is, then, a near-contemporary of communicative approaches, and shares a general interest in the importance of communication. As represented for second and foreign language instruction in Crawford-Lange’s (1981) curriculum design principles, this position suggests that education aims “to develop critical thinking by presenting the people’s situation to them as a problem so that they can perceive, reflect, and act on it” (p. 259). In this approach, “the life situation of the learners” (p. 262) should be the primary content of curriculum and “dialogue forms the context of the educational situation” (p. 263). Students use learning materials they themselves produced and the teacher “participates in the process of knowing as a learner among learners” (p. 266).

Contrary to the traditional banking education, which means transmission of knowledge from teachers to students, in the problem-posing model, the teacher “poses problems and engages students in dialogue and critical reflection” so that knowledge is “collaboratively constructed, involving the transformation of traditional teacher-student roles” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 12). During the dialogical engagement between teacher and students and students themselves, the life experiences of students are emphasized, through which the students begin to recognize each other as sources of knowledge. While producing and evaluating their learning materials, students are engaged in the decision-making process in class, which in turn leads to their own decision-making outside the classroom (Auerbach, 1995; McLaren, 1988; Shor, 1996).

A class of this kind should help students gain transformative experience by problematizing the status quo (Shor, 1996). Through critical dialogue in class, students can gain control over their learning and gain a critical view of their learning and the society. Through awareness of the link between their life issues and the macro sociopolitical and cultural context, they learn to make decisions in and outside the classroom and can eventually engage in socially transforma-
tive action outside the classroom.

It is widely accepted among language teachers that the language class is a place where people learn new ways of communication and understanding of the world through the sociocultural framework a language provides (Wink, 1999). If one accepts that this sociocultural framework, like any conceptual framework, influences one’s understanding of the world, then any practice of language learning and teaching is inherently political and socially constructed (Auerbach 1995; Pennycook, 1989). It would then follow that the macro social, cultural, and political contexts in which the learner is situated should be embodied in the curriculum, and teachers should play an envisioning role in critical educational practice. Above all, in this tradition, at the classroom level the concept of dialogue between teacher and student seems uppermost; and at the societal level, all educators are seen as intellectuals who can and should be engaged in action and critique intended to improve society.

To develop that final point a little more: it is sometimes argued that there are two somewhat distinct lines of discussion within critical pedagogy. One is very closely connected with classroom practice, curriculum, materials, student-teacher interactions and style. (In the second/foreign language arena, the earlier work of Wallerstein, Auerbach, and Crawford-Lange would exemplify this.) The other is more connected with the work of the critical pedagogue as academic, as critic of curriculum and educational policy in general, as author and public intellectual. (Here we think of the work of McLaren [e.g., 1998], Giroux [e.g., 1983], and for the second language field, Pennycook [e.g., 2001].)

Critical pedagogy is not “single-strategy pedagogies of empowerment, emancipation or liberation” (Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 7), and thus should be able to evolve in response to the local contexts and needs. As we outline in the immediately following section, the local contexts of East Asian classrooms have been presented in some of what we earlier referred to as defensive or Orientalizing literature in a way that makes one wonder whether they could accommodate a critical pedagogy (given the features we have just sketched). Specialists in this area, and those interested in progressive (but culturally-appropriate) change in second and foreign language instruction, might ask themselves “Could a critical pedagogy of any kind, or one concerning language, be done in East Asian classrooms?” One could answer the question in two ways, perhaps: through empirical test (see [present authors], submitted), or through theoretical and historical analysis, as follows.

Cultures of learning in East Asian countries: stereotypes, questioning, and change

The stereotype

Asian countries with a Confucian heritage are stereotypically assumed to have school systems uncongenial to questioning the status quo (cf. Kubota, 1999). Discussions about indigenous educational traditions and practices in
those countries exist of course, but their applications to language in education have until recently been quite rare, have tended to draw on the context in Japan or China (e.g., Gorsuch, 1998, 2001; Rao, 1996), and in many cases have failed to move away from the discourse of “Orientalism” (cf. Said, 1979). It is often assumed that the students in East Asian countries are submissive and obedient and the teachers are authoritative and authoritarian; therefore, the classrooms are supposedly rigid and hierarchical, which in turn makes discussion between students and teachers difficult (cf. Kubota, 2001). One important counter-example is Korea, which offers many practices of activism and innovative and dialogic educational practices both in the past and the present (cf. Cho, 1992; Kim, J., 1995; Kim, K., 1996; Kim, Y., 1998; Yang & Lee, 1998).

There has long been a stereotypical dichotomy of teacher-centered, static, and authoritarian classrooms in the East and student-centered, dynamic, and egalitarian classrooms in the West (Kubota, 1999, 2001; Reagan, 2000). That is, the West has been essentializing Asian classrooms as places where obedience and conformity to social norms are highly valued, where debate or discussion is not common particularly across status boundaries, and where authoritarian teachers are concerned with transmitting knowledge rather than being engaged in dialogue with the students (Duppenthaler, Viswat, & Onaka, 1989; Liggett, 1989; Katchen, 1989; Kubota, 2001).

Bracey (1997) is an example: “The goal of Asian education systems (and all authoritarian and totalitarian education systems) is obedience. In Japan it used to be obedience to the emperor; now it is simply obedience to the state and authority in general” (p. 21, as cited in Kubota, 2001, p. 22).

Kubota (1999) and Pennycook (1998), in particular, trace this distortion of the cultural image of Asian classrooms back to colonial discourse, which constantly tried to discover “differences” between the superior Western Self and the illogical, exotic, and inferior Other (cf. Said, 1979). Similarly, Reagan (2000) and Kim (1997) claim that this represents a general Western ethnocentrism. Goldstein (2003) reports that such colonialist and racist discourses are still prevalent in North American classrooms: in her critical ethnographic study in a Canadian high school, the quietness of students from Hong Kong in classes was considered as “burdensome and resented” by some of their non-Chinese and Canadian-born Chinese classmates (p. 59). The silence of the Hong Kong born Chinese students, often associated with the label “Orientals”, was equated with “a lack of understanding and passivity” and “inability to work at a grade 12 level” (p. 64) and therefore considered as a threat to quality public education by their classmates who manifest dominant Western notion of speech and silence. While it may be the case that many Asian classrooms have many unfavorable conditions for “dialogue” between teachers and students, at least in the ways this term is understood in the West, different cultures value different ways of communication and have different understandings of good teaching and learning style based on their own philosophical, historical, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Coleman, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Kim, 1997; Liggett, 1989; Reagan, 2000; Willet, 1987).
More broadly, there are major problems of overgeneralization in this literature, as was pointed out by Holliday (1994b) some time ago. He refers (p. 126) to “regional cultural profiling” as providing only the most limited insights into what can or does go on in classrooms, and calls instead for attention to “more precise uses” of the term “culture”, noting that educational projects, methodologies, and certainly classrooms, students or teachers can have their own microcultures, which may or may not be congruent with some perhaps quite dangerously stereotypical concept of “regional culture.”

**Questioning the stereotype: (1) the role of the student concerning questions**

We hardly need to point out that the same communicative act, mode, or style can be interpreted differently across cultural contexts. Kim (1997), for example, remarks that what some (particularly Westerners) might call “assertiveness” in interpersonal communication competence can often be interpreted as aggressiveness or arrogance in Korea. Arguments can disturb friendships in any country, but what is an argument, or the lengths a person might go to avoid one, differ across countries, with Japan being (stereotypically) averse to more open expressions of interpersonal conflict. In some Asian countries, reluctance to ask questions may be a signal of sensible respect for others and group work in school classrooms may not be as highly valued as teacher’s explanations as the best use of limited class time in large classes (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Accordingly, interpreting students’ preference for listening to the teacher in these countries as lack of independence or orientation to grades is often misleading (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Goldstein (2003), citing Asian-American scholar King-Kok Cheung (1993), also provides an alternative understanding of the silences: attentive silence is “a form of silence in which there is acute listening, empathy for others, and awareness of even the subtlest signs from a speaker” and is therefore “a quiet understanding,” which is “the antithesis of passivity” (p. 65). Likewise, Malcolm and Hongjio’s (1989) discussion of different ways of information organization and argumentation styles in different cultures leads us to reflect on different understandings of being “logical” in different cultures.

In light of this, the different function and nature of questions in Eastern and Western classrooms warrants a better recognition. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) report a counter-example of the common view of Asian students as passive and reluctant to ask questions. In their study, Chinese students valued independent study and chose being active, asking questions in class, and having one’s own view and expressing it, although different from the teacher’s, as characteristics of good students (p. 191). However, they favored thoughtful questions after reflection and further reading over spontaneous questions in class, out of their sensitivity to limited class time or out of their reluctance to stand out in front of others. As a result, many Chinese students prefer asking questions after class, so as not to interrupt the whole class, in contrast to the Western interpretation of asking questions as a discussion-promoting device in class (pp. 194-198). Cantonese-speaking students in Goldstein’s (2003) study worried about being perceived
as “showing off” or “whitewashed” by their Chinese peers and were reluctant to speak up (in English) in class. In addition, some Asian students are reported to think that “there is no need to reiterate an opinion that has already been aired by another student” (p. 66). Kim (1997) contends that, while being active in class was often related to showing a strong verbal communication ability in American schools, the importance of listening and learning from others was often emphasized over verbal communication in Korea.

**Questioning the stereotype: (2) the role of the teacher**

Cultural values affect the expectations of a good teacher and a good student as well. Characteristics of a good teacher listed by Cortazzi & Jin’s (1996) Chinese students included being a role model, a friend, a parent, and being strict (p. 188). Cortazzi and Jin argued that Western teachers value interaction, creativity, self-expression, and experiential learning, while Chinese teachers emphasize the importance of discipline and providing necessary knowledge in the classroom (p. 177). This provides a different interpretation of the teacher-student relationship in East Asian countries from the often-believed authoritative one. Students in these countries often expect teachers to listen to their personal issues even outside the classroom and consequently “expect the teacher to realize” their problems, while “the Western teachers will usually assume that any students with problems will ask for help.” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 190).

At the same time, cultures of learning in East-Asian countries have drastically altered in response to rapid social change, especially among young people (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). As a result, in present-day China, Japan, and Korea, young people are not particularly shy. Their non-expressiveness in foreign language classrooms may only result from their lack of English proficiency or may be due to institutional constraints such as large classrooms and fixed curricula, which can be changed and are changing (cf. McVeigh, 2002). In sum, we join with those scholars who have argued that East-Asian students are actually active and independent, but the way this independence manifests is different from that of Western students. There is a compelling need to consider the diverse cultural and historical backgrounds of a given cultural context in which we are attempting to apply a pedagogical idea.

**The Confucian background of East Asian cultures of learning—another stereotype?**

**The dominant aspect of this image**

Chinese influence in East Asian cultures, mainly through Confucian educational thought, implies common philosophical foundations for East Asian cultures of learning (Reagan, 2000). In contemporary Korea, for example, although Confucianism as a dominant state ideology has disappeared, Confucian values and practices are still pervasive in Korean family, educational, and other social practices (Kim, 1996; Koh, 1996), working as “a civic culture rather than a religion” (Kim, 1996, p. 216). In Confucianism, self-cultivation through learning
and practice is highly valued, and it is through education that people reach the
target of the “ideal person” (Chinese: chün-tzu; Korean: kunja) and the ideal
society (Kim, 1996; Reagan, 2000; Wyatt, 1990).

Yum (1987) argued that the Confucian emphasis on propriety in human re-
lationships affected communication behaviors in Korea: accommodation is fa-
vored over confrontation, revealing emotion in communication is discouraged,
and, consequently, indirect communication is preferred. This in turn leads to the
emphasis on communication outside of the verbal realm. She went on to argue
that Buddhism reinforced the Confucian distrust of verbal communication; in
other words, many schools of Buddhism conceived of verbal communication as
incomplete and illusory. As such, the importance of silence in communication
increases and communication without words, or communication “transcending
the limitation of words” (p. 83) is valued as the highest level of communication.

In China, traditional education emphasized filial piety, loyalty, and politeness
and respect for elders; therefore, children are often taught not to talk back to
their elders (Gernet, 1982, as cited in Reagan, 2000, p.110). The following ex-
cerpt from the Analects (Lunyu) illustrates of the disregard of verbal expression
in Confucian thought:

When a gentleman is ignorant of something, he should offer no opinion. If
terms are not correct, then what is said will not accord with what is in-
tended. If what is said does not accord with what is intended, affairs will not
achieve success….The thing about the gentleman is that he is never careless
where speech is concerned. (Confucius, as cited in Wyatt, 1990, p.40)

The other side of this image

As examined so far, Confucianism, along with Buddhism, has significantly
couraged implicit communicational behavior in East Asian countries. Al-
though Confucianism, with its emphasis on loyalty to the state and filial piety to
parents, served to reinforce existing social structure, a somewhat democratic
characteristic in Confucian educational thought was embodied in the Chinese
civil service examination system. In its early implementations, for example, the
examination was employed as a political device to allow some degree of social
class mobility based on meritocracy (Reagan, 2000).

Wyatt (1990) disputed the common belief that Confucian scholars indulged
heavily in abstract investigation of the world, disengaged from real world issues.
Contrary to the distinction between “the philosopher’s logic and the politician’s
rhetoric” (p. 60) in ancient Greece, Confucian philosophers, who were often also
politicians, concerned themselves with social engagement and believed that
knowledge should be practiced in society and should affect action directly. In
addition, they conceptualized language on this premise: unlike the highly spe-
cialized descriptive language of classical Western philosophers, Confucian
scholars conceived of language as a tool to “affect conduct directly, by incul-
cating proper attitudes” (p. 58), which should be easily accessible to common peo-
Consequently, how to use language “became emblematic of one’s social worth” (p. 59). The strong attachment to social practices of Confucianism is also reflected in *zhongyong*, the Doctrine of the Mean: “Only the man who places himself in the midst of worldly affairs is capable of transforming other men” (Confucius, as cited in Wyatt, 1990, p. 36). It is to this innovative nature of Confucianism and activist practices in Korea that we now turn.

**Activist practices in Korea: The past and the present the past**

Confucianism produced many innovative practices of activism in Korean history with its commitment to social engagement. In addition, its emphasis on consistency in one’s behavior and words and a close relationship between theory and practice has been incorporated into rich traditions in modern critical scholarship in Korea. The adverse political situation in Korea up until the fall of the recent military dictatorship in the early 1990s has obliged authors to be circumspect in putting forward their ideas in this area, however (Lee, 1996; Yang & Lee, 1998). Lee (1987) illustrates, further into the past, that communication in politics even across status barriers was very active during the neo-Confucian Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910). During this time, for example, a group of autonomous Confucian scholars called *Sarim* worked as the main communication channel between the common people and the king to incorporate public opinion into the national policies. With their belief in the democratic political philosophy of the Confucian position that government should exist for the people, they pointed out injustice, often at the expense of their lives.

One of the most valuable indigenous progressive lines of scholarship in Korea was established by a group of critical scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who developed an approach known as *Sirhak*. The *Sirhak* scholars advocated the claim of Wang Yangming of China: “knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge— that they are, in effect, one” (Lee, 1996, pp. 213–214) and criticized formalism, lack of national identity, and compliance with the ruling ideology of Korean Neo-Confucianism at that time. They advocated political, economic, social, and educational reforms for human equality—reforms of the landholding system and the abolition of class barriers and of slavery—and agitated against social injustice and the corrupt feudal ruling class, *yangban*. They criticized the examination-oriented education at the state institutes and developed the *sowon*, a private higher education institute, where young scholars learned the indigenous knowledge of Confucianism mainly through discussion (Lee, 1996, p. 209). Chong Yakyong, one of the most prominent *Sirhak* scholars, criticized the decontextualized language teaching that relied on traditional Chinese texts, prevalent at the time, and published a new textbook for Korean children (Yu, 1994).

Confucian critical activism culminated in vigorous independence movements during the Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945), involving violent resistance against Japan and military operations against the Japanese army under the Korean government-in-exile in China, and through military operations against the Japanese army. Buswell (1998) illustrates that Buddhism was also
influential in nationalistic activism during the colonial period. Han Yongun, engaged in the progressive reformist movement in Korean Buddhism during the colonial period, wrote *Choson Pulgyo yusillon* (Treatise on the Reformation of Korean Buddhism). He conceptualized Buddhism as the “ideology of equality” and “ideology of saving the world” (p. 93) and applied Western liberalism to a Buddhist context.

Examples of Koreans using education as a means of liberation are found in nationwide innovative educational movements during the Japanese colonial period (Kim, 1995; Kim, 1996). Many Koreans, deprived of opportunities for decent education due to the Japanese colonial educational policy, established private schools and organized non-institutionalized education, such as *yahak* (night classes), to inspire national identity. Korean traditional education was transformed into a more democratic and innovative one during this time, including education for women and others who had been excluded under the feudalistic class system (Kim, 1995). Kim (1998) writes that students have always been extremely active participants in these oppositional movements in Korean history, which significantly contributed to the formation of a culture of student political activism in Korea. Korean students have developed “a uniquely active culture of expressing their dissatisfaction towards things in and outside the university classroom” (p. 400), through raising issues from democratization of Korean society to more recent issues of campus-democratization related to educational policy.

Student political activism after the Japanese colonial era is traced back to the April 19 student revolution in 1960 against the dictatorship of President Lee Seungman of the First Republic. The huge demonstration initiated by students witnessed the establishment of the democratic government and has subsequently been a symbol of people’s power in Korea. Students played a major role in the civil uprising in Kwangju, a city in southwest Korea, against the new military regime in 1980, which resulted in the massacre of many students and citizens. The mass protests in 1987 finally terminated the long period of military dictatorships and the first democratic presidential election system by direct voting was introduced. Student activism in Korea gained strong public support and was closely related to other civil movements, particularly the labor movement. Students are often seen as having a responsibility for preventing social and political corruption and required to take actions against injustice in Korea (Kim, 1998). One example of this linkage is found in the continued existence of *yahak*, in which, in its current form, students teach laborers or other people who have not acquired a decent education in the institutionalized school system. Student reading groups on campus, providing a critical perspective toward society through debating sociopolitical issues in Korea, have operated as organizational units of the student movement.

Tangherlini (1998) identified *minjungjuui*, or *minjungjuui* nationalism as an underlying philosophy of the student movement in contemporary Korea (p. 135). *Minjungjuui* focuses on the struggles of *minjung*, the oppressed urban and
rural poor, for “the overthrow of military authoritarianism and the establishment of a government of ‘minjung democracy’... [and] the elimination of foreign influence” (Dong 1987, p. 247, as cited in Tangherlini, 1998, p.135). Tangherlini (1998) went on to argue that minjungjuui’s emphasis on minjung munhwa (the culture of the minjung) has interestingly incorporated Korean Shamanism into student activism through traditional cultural performances during student demonstrations. The transformation of the patriarchal power relation during the shamanistic ritual, kut, is particularly noteworthy: although the purpose of kut is to ensure established order, the role of the female shaman as the central authority during kut may be perceived as subverting the patriarchal order of the larger society (p. 133). (Christianity, a foreign religion in Korea, also promoted the radical spirit. Baker (1998) argues that Catholics and Protestants in Korea have pursued social issues in Korea along with their religious missions. It is not uncommon to find a Christian activist on the front lines of demonstrations against dictatorship in Korea. Catholic churches in Korea have often been used as shelters for antigovernment activists.) The co-existence of these traditions was described by Callahan (1998) as a heterotopia, where Confucianism, native Shamanism, and the Western religion of Christianity sometimes co-exist and are sometimes transformed into new indigenous ideas. The rich traditions of critical activism in Korea have been inherited by contemporary educational and feminist movements, which we discuss in the next section.

The present

There are many non-traditional, innovative voices in contemporary Korea as well, especially concerning feminism and in education and there have been a wave of “feminist” movements. Shim (1998) describes cases of lesbian women creating organizations to voice their own rights, and groups of women, though still small in number, that reject established approaches to marriage. In addition, the women’s movement in Korea has worked for the abolition of sexual discrimination in employment. The “Another Culture” Movement, organized in 1984 by foreign-educated progressive female intellectuals, is particularly noteworthy among these various movements (Shim, 1998). The “Another Culture” group critiques the present patriarchal ideology in Korean society and seeks an alternative model or pattern for of women’s lives which would eventually transform society.

One of their members, Cho, active in Korean higher education, presents a pedagogy close to critical pedagogy. Her educational perspective is illustrated in the preface to one of her works.

This book is about ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’, that is, about ‘thinking about pedagogy.’ My decision not to lecture led the students to ‘learning’, and the student voices, which filled this book, ‘taught’ me as a teacher….This first volume ‘shows’ how to read the word and the world, based on the discussions and self-reflection in the real classroom."(Cho, 1992, p. 7)
With her interest in knowledge and colonialism as a sociologist and feminist, she tried an experiment in her ‘Munhwa Iron’ (Cultural Theories) class in spring 1991, under the theme of “reading words and life.” Her interest in relating literacy to real world issues is reflected in the course syllabus:

The instructor does not want the students to be theoretically knowledgeable. In fact, we will discuss in this class how meaningless it is to be theoretically knowledgeable in the current situation. I hope that the students enter the class to make meaning themselves in this era when being theoretically knowledgeable is possible only by preserving the colonial framework (p. 28).

She chose Korean texts instead of those of common Western authors such as Gramsci, Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault, Habermas, and Giddens to help students gain real knowledge. The class was conducted through discussion, with both the instructor and the students sitting in a circle. The dialogue extended to students’ written weekly journals on the readings and feedback from the instructor. Participation in class was voluntary and grades were decided through self-assessment by the students. Cho describes her experiment as a success and reported that she “could teach Munhwa Iron properly by not teaching the existing Munhwa Iron” (p. 35).

At the level of elementary and secondary schools, there has long been a strong struggle by teachers to establish and gain legitimacy for the National Teachers’ Labor Union in Korea. Since the hunger strike by 1,900 teachers in 1960, despite the government’s strong repression of its members through dismissal, imprisonment, and prosecution, and through expulsion and suspension of the students who supported the union, the teachers and the students believed that students, teachers, and parents, not the government, should be agents of education and should actively participate in educational reformation by Cham-Kyoyuk (true education), their upholding slogan (Ahn, 1996). More recent activities of the union involve development of curriculum, materials, methodology and evaluation, as well as publication of their own textbooks, along with expressing their concern over the crisis of public education. Within the area of second/foreign language teaching, the Korean English Teachers’ Group, under the Union, has been very active in organizing workshops and conferences, providing materials for English teachers. They also conducted teach-ins concerning Japanese history textbooks that distorted historical facts concerning the colonial period, and organized anti-war demonstrations.

In contemporary Korea, dialogue between teachers and students is active in such ways as publishing classroom journals and school newspapers full of students’ real world issues and students’ posting their opinions about educational issues on school web-pages and those of the Board of Education or the Ministry of Education. The rich multi-media resources in many Korean classrooms (cf. Jung & Norton, 2002) and nation-wide use of the Internet and cellular phones are also creating alternative types of communication. Innovative educational
practices are more visible at the extra-curricular level, some course offerings of
which include social studies often focussing on youth culture and women’s cul-
ture. Some recent government policies such as making entrance exams less dif-
ficult, diversifying the qualifications for admission to college, and emphasizing
performance-based tests allow more room for teachers to introduce innovative
ideas into curriculum.

Conclusion
Would-be non-mainstream educators in all countries are always likely to be
challenged by a lack of models and a lack of descriptions. The hegemonic nature
of history-writing, and the usually marginal, evanescent, and poorly-documented
character of educational institutions and programs that are not mainstream, mean
that a continual activity of “memory-work” is needed to preserve and make avail-
able those alternative traditions. Many Korean teachers are not aware of the full
range of their educational inheritances, any more than most teachers in Western
countries like the U.S. or the UK know much about alternative schools in general,
the free schools of the 1960s, or the socialist Sunday schools of the 1920s. Even
long-standing libertarian educational institutions like Summerhill or its Japanese
equivalent, Kinokuni, are unfamiliar to most. But educators who work with the
currently-dominant international language are in a particularly difficult situation.
At least in the recent past, Western experts in ES/FL teaching have not always
followed the advice offered by Coleman (1996, p. 13), to “examine traditional
modes of behavior” and, for that matter, “to explore the possibility... of exploiting
current patterns of behavior” in developing ELT practices. Particularly in the field
of S/FL curriculum, non-Western specialists may feel the pressure of discussions
(and discourses) which present a particular picture of, for example, how Korean
students are; which specify the nature of Chinese learning practices (consider
Gardner, 1991); which write into existence the author’s conception of Japanese
students; and do so, in each case, as the dominant depiction. Conservative indige-
nous educators are willing to join this account, and together they constitute a dis-
couraging, demoralizing tide to swim against.

The history of education, and comparative education, are fields not usually ap-
pealed to in studies of language and curriculum; the history of alternative education
even less so. Yet even minor initiatives, such as communicative approaches for exam-
ple, constitute alternative education from the point of view of presently existing prac-
tices in many countries. Accordingly, many ES/FL specialists do actually need to ac-
cess these somewhat buried histories. And so long as these histories are not even avail-
able in the dominant language of international academia, substantial spade-work must
be done. Go-ahead indigenous innovative educators in EFL will continue to turn to the
literature of applied linguistics for guidance. It presents a range of alternative chal-
lenes, none of which will be taken up if indigenous educators believe that there is
nothing equivalent in the histories of education they are heir to. We would like to sug-
gest, however, that such histories do exist. It was this sort of excavation that encou-
raged one of us (Shin) to go on to empirical investigations (Shin & Crookes, 2005). We
hope that the present piece will encourage other such studies.
Notes
1. Although Pennycook says that overall “there is still a lack of studies of its implementation in classrooms” (2001, p. 130).
2. We are aware of just one paper (Sung, 2002) which introduces the ideas of critical theory and pedagogy into the Korean literature of ELT, addressing a mainly Korean readership. This is a useful discussion of the Western mainstream (non-ELT/FL) critical pedagogy literature, but does not attempt to address questions of implementation, cultural appropriateness, and so on.
3. Or in older, liberal variants of this tradition, through the literatures of the foreign language.
4. As Holliday (1994, p. 131) noted, admittedly ten years ago.
5. For a couple of examples of didacticism in European education, see Duff (1995, on Hungary) and Sharpe (1992, on France).
6. The interview data from Mina, a Canadian-born woman of Indo-Caribbean ancestry, illustrates how silence is often associated with being Asian: “In this class, there are more Orientals and Orientals I find to be quieter people, like, you know, maybe that’s why” (Goldstein, 2003, p. 62).
7. Yum (1987) and Tsujimura (1987) describe “i-sim jun-sim” (Korean) or “ishindenshin” (Japanese) as the highest level of communication. Both of the phrases are originally from the same Chinese expression, which literally means “convey mind, by mind”, that is, the instantaneous meeting of two minds without using language. Therefore, in Asian cultures, the listener, not the speaker, is often more responsible for communication.
8. The special argumentation patterns in Confucianism include “the rhetorical ‘chain argument,’ argument by appeal to antiquity, and argument by analogy” (Wyatt, 1990, p.40). This appeal to antiquity suggests another interpretation of plagiarism or the ownership of text and the perception of a text and a teacher as a model in Confucian East Asian countries. Wyatt (1990) relates “the desire to cite precedents in the revered past for present-day actions” (p. 40) to the Confucian view of “the past as adumbrating the present and the future” (p. 41). Consequently, this is not a simple imitation but a very complex work “because it demands detailed historical knowledge on the part of the formulator” (p. 41). This resonates with memorizing common texts to prepare for the civil service examination in ancient China as “a broad and deep common intellectual base for each generation of Chinese officials” (Reagan, 2000, p. 112).
9. This term literally meant “a substantive, true science, as opposed to an idealistic, pseudo-science” (Lee, 1996, p. 207).
10. The yahak was voluntarily organized by the community people and was very progressive. The curriculum reflected local needs, spanning Japanese language, English, writing and math as well as Korean language (Kim, 1995, p. 251).
11. Though the tremendous institutional constraint and lack of autonomy in the school system is one of the biggest concerns to many contemporary Korean educators, the nationalistic educational movements during the colonial period were often voluntarily organized by the community people and were quite progressive and radical. The curriculum reflected the local needs, spanning Japanese language, English, writing and
math as well as Korean language. Women’s movements emerged in Korea in the 19th century, with a new group of Korean women with higher education, and also played a major role in independence movements. Marxism, introduced by students who had studied in Japan and later formed socialist organizations in Korea, had an enormous impact on the independence movement in Korea during this time. Korean Communists’ collaboration with the Bolsheviks in their fight against Japan in Manchuria and Siberia was followed by the establishment of the Korean communist party in the 1920s (Yang & Lee, 1998, p. 372).

12. Accordingly, it is necessary to further explore, as Kim (1998) rightly points out, how to incorporate the student political activism in Korea to the classroom environment in constructive ways.


14. All the excerpts from this book translations from Korean into English by the first author.

15. However, she reported that there was no serious problem with participation, as “out of 35 who were enrolled to the end of semester, there were always around 25 students attended and participated in discussion, and when they missed classes, students submitted their journals and sometimes listened to tapes of the lesson” (Cho, 1992, p. 35).

16. The importance of communication between teachers and students outside classrooms in Asian countries was mentioned earlier in this paper. The exchange of personal letters between teachers and students has traditionally been popular in Korea and modern technology expands this with e-mail and text messages of cellular phones. It is not uncommon these days for both universities and secondary school students and teachers to use an Internet café for class (as well as social) purposes.


**References**


Exploring the Possibilities for EFL Critical Pedagogy in Korea: A Two-Part Case Study

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The paper reports an investigation carried out in two Korean EFL classrooms, being small-scale interventions within existing classrooms or institutional structures. A teacher-researcher introduced critically-oriented material using an optional class in a junior high school and an existing class in a senior high school. The focus was on establishing critical dialogue between students and teachers, providing opportunities for learners to develop English language abilities while engaging in critical discussion of topics. Data collected included audio and videotapes of classrooms, oral and written interviews with students and teachers, student class evaluations, and associated documents. Findings (based on qualitative analyses of data) suggest that students were by no means resistant to this kind of material or class, and showed the ability to handle and generate critical dialogue in English. Students recognized the classes as challenging though not as focused on exam preparation as their regular course offerings. The study, while small-scale and exploratory, calls into question the stereotype of East Asian students as passive and non-autonomous and helps dispel the idea that East Asian classrooms are inherently rigidly hierarchical.

Introduction

The history of innovation and change in EFL outside of the West in recent decades has been presented, in a number of places, as one of often unsuccessful importations of Western approaches that are hard to implement, and hard to enable to take root (e.g., Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994a). The adoption of approaches that require active classroom participation, discussion, or debate, have been seen as particularly likely to fail in certain East Asian classrooms (e.g., LoCastro, 1994). Some specialists would caution that there is a tendency to
overgeneralize specific instances of student or teacher behavior, the microcultures of EFL, to regional cultures as a whole and then draw unfounded conclusions about the feasibility of a particular approach (Holliday, 1994b). Others have referred to negative depictions of Asian educational settings as having characteristics of “Orientalizing” discourse—that is to say, they misrepresent the cultures in question, viewing them in terms of how they expect the “East” to be, rather than how it (or parts of it) actually are (e.g., Kubota, 1999). While cultural sensitivity is certainly necessary if educational ideas are to be imported successfully, insofar as pessimism about their utility is partly driven by inaccurate, over-generalized, or culturally-uninformed views of the educational cultures in question, it seems desirable to continue to explore the full range of possibilities. In this paper we report on two small initiatives implementing some aspects of a putatively more challenging pedagogical theory, critical pedagogy, in Korean EFL settings.

**Critical pedagogy**

The educational philosophy of Paulo Freire suggests that education aims “to develop critical thinking by presenting the people’s situation to them as a problem so that they can perceive, reflect, and act on it” (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p. 259). Accordingly, “the life situation of the learners” (p. 262) should be the primary content of curriculum and “dialogue forms the context of the educational situation” (p. 263). Students use learning materials they themselves produced and the teacher “participates in the process of knowing as a learner among learners” (p. 266).

This line of curriculum theory juxtaposes its preferred practices with those of what it calls traditional or banking education. Under this heading, critical pedagogy specialists refer to teaching which is merely the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. By contrast, in the problem-posing model of critical pedagogy the teacher engages in critical dialogue with the students, helping them identify the issues they themselves see as problematic, and rather than “solve” problems, reflects back these problems (problem-posing) as the driving force for a process of collaboratively constructed knowledge. (For the S/FL area there are many presentations of these basic ideas; see, e.g., Auerbach, 1995.) During the dialogical engagement between teacher and students and students themselves, the life experiences of students are emphasized, through which the students begin to recognize each other as sources of knowledge. While producing and evaluating their learning materials, students are engaged in the decision making process in class, which in turn leads to their own decision making outside the classroom (Auerbach, 1995; McLaren, 1988; Shor, 1996).

An important point of critical pedagogy is identified by Shor (1996), who suggests that such classes should help students gain transformative experience by problematizing the status quo. Through critical dialogue in class, students can gain control over their learning and gain critical view of their learning and the society. Through the awareness of the link between their life issues and the
The language class is a place where people learn new ways of communication and understanding of the world through a particular lens (Wink, 1999). Given that one’s understanding of the world is influenced by one’s views and values, any practice of language learning and teaching is inherently political and socially constructed (Auerbach 1995; Pennycook, 1989). Consequently, the macro social, cultural, and political contexts where the learner is situated should be embodied in the curriculum, and teachers should play an envisioning role in critical educational practice.

As Luke & Gore (1992) pointed out, however, critical pedagogy is not “single-strategy pedagogies of empowerment, emancipation or liberation” (p. 7), but should be able to evolve in response to local contexts and needs. Accordingly, in response to the increasing emphasis on promoting wider exposure to the communicative use of English in EFL classrooms in Korea, as well as to the still-pervasive Western assumptions of East Asian classrooms as passive and authoritarian, in this paper we focus on the matter of dialogue between students and teachers and the incorporation of critical issues into communicative English learning activities in beginning EFL classrooms in Korea. The description of the context and the process of the classes that were taught is what we turn to next. The teaching itself was conducted by one of us (Shin), so the sections that follow present a first-person account.  

The study

The study took place in two different EFL classes in South Korea, primarily during May 2001 through July 2001, with some subsequent email follow up, and some additional data collected from end-of-year course evaluations in February 2002. With the significant institutional constraints of Korean EFL classrooms in mind, this investigation constituted “a small-scale intervention within [an] existing curriculum and institutional structure” (Ohara et al., 2001, p. 5). As a teacher-researcher, I wanted to see if I could successfully integrate critical lessons or material into an existing curriculum. I was particularly concerned with how to foster critical dialogue between students and teachers and how to provide opportunities for learners to develop English language abilities while engaging in critical discussion of topics.

The classes were all audiotaped and some videotaped, with the students’ and the teacher’s consent. Data for the present study also included audiotaped interviews of the teacher (conducted in Korean), written reports from the high school students (in English), students’ reflections on the course (written in Korean), end of school-year course evaluations from high school students (written in Korean), students’ worksheets, computer files of student presentations, and email exchanges with the students (mostly in English) as well as my field notes and journals. All the taped data were transcribed later, and Korean data and transcriptions were translated into English by me. The classes were mostly con-
ducted in English and students’ written reports and worksheets were also written in English. However, course evaluations were written in Korean and the interview with the teacher was also conducted in Korean.

Data were analyzed using the procedures of constant comparison. All sources of data were reviewed in light of an a priori concern with manifestations of critical dialogue and non-authoritarian teacher-student interactions; at the same time I was alert to emergent themes. Sections of data were coded thematically, and initial generalizations about such groupings were made as tentative hypotheses, some of which received support from successive cycles of data collection analysis (cf. LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, Strauss, 1987). (In what follows, all participant names are pseudonyms.)

The junior high school “Thematic English” class

My first attempt was in an extra-curricular English class as part of an after-school program at a girls’ junior high school in a large city in South Korea, which I gained entrée to via a friend who was a lead teacher there. The school offered an after-school English program, but the parents at this school could afford private English lessons, so student participation in the program was not very high. As the study was carried out in the middle of the semester, the class was organized as a temporary class, reflecting my availability (as well as student interest). Twelve ninth graders of varying proficiency in English volunteered to join the class. During fourteen class periods, students addressed the topic of “cultural stereotypes,” through developing “travel plans” that called for research projects and involved discussions as well as e-mail communication with me. Presentations using student-generated materials in PowerPoint format were followed by critical discussion and reflection on the lesson.

The junior high school was located in a middle-class neighborhood. This class was laid on specially, as an after-school class, organized in the middle of the semester. It consisted of 14 class hours, mostly meeting three times per week over a five-week period. Many students were in their third year of formal English instruction, and like many other students in Korea, were taking extra English classes outside school.

Initial discussions and readings were aimed at fostering learner autonomy and establishing rapport while looking for possible topics to investigate. We talked about each other and the characteristics of the class so that the students could have some idea of its content and nontraditional format. E-mail was used to promote communication in English between the students and me and to help me understand student needs and goals better.

The major part of the course consisted of student discussions and presentations using student-generated materials. Six (out of fourteen) class periods were devoted to discussions to develop student travel plans and presentations. I tried to help students develop their ideas by providing them with discussion questions. I also taught relevant English vocabulary and expressions they needed to make their travel plans, so as not to neglect developing student English abilities.
The presentations were followed by four class period discussions on “stereotypes,” which emerged from the presentations.

**The senior high school “English Culture” class and Jinho**

I also joined a senior high school English class in the same city as a co-teacher during sixteen class meetings with four different groups of students. Each class had twenty-eight eleventh graders. (In this case, my entrée was through my friendship with the teacher I co-taught with.) The class was co-taught with Jinho, the teacher of a course entitled “English Culture.” The school, serving students of grades 10-12, was smaller than most other high schools in the city in size because it had a curriculum with a strong emphasis on foreign languages. The students were mostly from a middle class neighborhood and were high academic achievers. All the students lived in a dorm and went home only during weekends. The students were, like other Korean senior high school students, under strong pressure to prepare for the college entrance examination and accordingly did not have much time to do out-of-class assignments.

The “English Culture” class was one of the six English classes for the eleventh grade at the school. Although the class was part of the regular school curriculum, due to its focus on culture, the teachers could enjoy relatively greater autonomy. The class was taught twice a week in a special English classroom, with the teacher and the students sitting in a circle. In it, they were asked to use English only, and did so to a degree much greater than most Korean senior high school English classes. This was possible mainly because the class was about “English Culture” and was not a reading or grammar-oriented course but also because the school has a particular emphasis on foreign languages in its curriculum. Jinho, in his mid thirties, received his Master’s degree in TESOL in the U.S. and had been teaching English for three years at the time of the study. Although he was not particularly aware of critical pedagogy, he had a strong commitment and professional attitude to teaching. He was very enthusiastic about enhancing students’ oral and written communicative ability and had a good reputation in the school. The following excerpt from an interview with him indicates his philosophy of teaching:

> It is true that there are lots of problems in real classrooms but there are still lots of things that we, as teachers, can change. To make all the students good at English sounds rather difficult, but as a teacher we need to have that dream. Learning English is not about activities but about how to live in society, after all. We can let the students reflect on these things in class. If a singer is carrying his message through his songs, teachers do that through their teaching. (interview data, June 20, 2002; senior author’s translation)

His understanding of teaching culture, as reflected in the course syllabus, was progressive in that he was seriously trying to engage his students in exploration of culture, with the goal of enhancing students’ knowledge and skills in
intercultural communication through examination and integration of the target culture (English culture) and Korean culture. The teacher’s goal for the students was to enable them to “explain the concept of culture in their own languages and understand how culture-related conflicts occur and how they can handle them properly.”

The course consisted of three modules; (1) What is culture, (2) Target culture and Own culture, (3) Synthesis and Final paper: cultural autobiography. Successful completion of the course depended on fulfillment of all of the course requirements, which included attendance, participation, and completion of assignments, along with students’ own assessment of their work and a written test per semester. There was a required text, but additional readings were assigned as the course developed. The lesson Jinho and I designed for “Current Korean culture”, as part of the second module of “Target culture and Own culture” covered four class periods. (The data derived from this represent a total time period of 800 minutes: the lesson was run four times, each time with a different group of students. I took the leading teacher role in half of them (with two groups, eight class periods) and Jinho did so with the other two groups.) The students, in groups of four, investigated the topic through discussions, presentations, and a written reports followed by reflection on the lesson.

In order for me to get a better understanding of the classroom culture before joining the class to build “a pedagogy situated in student conditions” (Shor, 1996, p. 29), Jinho and I had several organizational meetings over the three weeks preceding the lesson to discuss our pedagogical interests and teaching philosophies. I also observed one class of his before I joined his class as well as interviewed him. After the lesson was finished, we had meetings to read students’ writing and to evaluate our own efforts.

The focus of the “current Korean culture” lesson was how we could address “culture” to foster a critical perspective on the students’ side based on students’ own interests, going beyond such common communicative activities as introducing famous places in foreign countries. Accordingly, our goal was not to reach an agreement on what the current Korean culture was but was to foster students’ exploratory thinking and critical perspective on culture in general. The lesson comprised (1) Group discussion: choosing the topic, (2) Developing ideas and poster design, (3) Poster presentation, and (4) Reflection and writing.

In the first class, the students were asked, in groups of four, to decide “What do you think can best represent current Korean culture?” After group discussion, each group reported to the whole class what they chose and their reasons for making their choices. The topics were generative, reflecting students’ own interests, and consequently often overlapped with each other. They included social/educational issues (early English education, early studying abroad, college entrance exam, cram schools, plastic surgery, Ajumma), unique aspects of Korean culture (public bathroom, dog-meat soup) and contemporary teen-age culture (cell phones, popular culture). In the second class, except for the brief whole-class discussion about “how to have a productive discussion,” most of the
class time was devoted to group work. The third class was for student presentations using the posters they produced. There followed another period of group work to reflect on their work in preparation for the final written report in the last class, which in turn was followed by a class discussion about the reflections on the whole lesson.

In the junior high school class, I tried to create an innovative curriculum for an after-school English program, as the course could enjoy more curricular flexibility as an extra-curricular class. By contrast, in the senior high school, I was more interested in exploring the possibility of dialogue between students and teacher, considering the constraints of the university entrance exam students were facing, as well as the pre-set curriculum, typical of Korean senior high schools.

Findings–students’ capability to handle a dialogic approach

Given the centrality of matters concerning dialogue and active participation, naturally both at the time of teaching and in subsequently analyzing the data collected, the findings address student-student and teacher-student dialogue, at varying levels of “demand.” I first summarize the findings which indicate that students were capable of engaging in dialogue, considered most simply. I then consider critical dialogue (how the dialogue could foster critical understanding of the chosen issues). Thereafter I focus on whether this is/was possible in English, and whether, or how, students learned English from their efforts in this area.

Dialogue

Throughout both sets of lessons, students actively participated in dialogue with the teacher and with each other. Most students reported that they enjoyed the process of learning through dialogue. Some students mentioned that they felt a bit “shy and awkward” at first, because, as one wrote “[we] were conscious of each other in expressing … opinions” and because “[we] were not used to discussion.” Many of them also wrote that they could gain more critical understandings of the topics by relating them to their own experiences and feelings.

Most of the students mentioned that the class was different from other classes in that “students led the discussion and class activities” in “an informal atmosphere”, so “teacher(s) and students learned together.” Typical terms used referred to feeling “comfortable” or “free” in the classroom. The junior high school students more explicitly mentioned that (as one wrote) “there was no gap between the teacher and the students.” (This was probably due to the after-school nature of the class or my status as a temporary teacher without any official status.) Many students found the class more meaningful than other classes because they talked about “something they themselves chose.” Some representative student comments were:
I think that this is the kind of English class I want. I learned a lot through active group discussion and presentation. I felt comfortable and the class was more interesting because it was completely led by us in the form of dialogue not by lecture of the teacher. I liked this class because we were given the opportunity to think and reflect on the topic, unlike in the traditional classroom where the teacher talks and the students listen. While talking about current Korean culture, I could also learn about my own stereotype and prejudice. (Jaehee, a junior high school student; translated)

We could play an active role in class. We had to look for the topic, do research, and get to our own conclusion, and could discuss about that conclusion with other classmates so that we could look at the same issue from alternative perspectives. We were not just receiving the knowledge the teacher provided for us, but we actively participated in discussion and led the class, which was fun and good. (Changho, a high school student; translated)

Although the class time was mostly devoted to students’ activities, either individual or group, I was particularly concerned about how to be a dialogical teacher and yet to maintain a certain level of authority by contributing my knowledge of and experience with the subject that I taught so that the class did not fall into what Freire in various places refers to dismissively as “laissez-faire pedagogy” (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1995). I tried to help students develop arguments through brainstorming, raised questions that led thinking to meaningful discussion, and let students respond to and challenge each other’s ideas, since we were dealing with quite a broad topic in a short time. This is reflected in the following student comment:

There was no correct answer so we could reflect on our own opinions, although we could get to a general understanding of the topic. And the discussion was not led by one person, although there was a suggestion of direction. The teacher understood the students’ thoughts very well and was ready to listen to us. (Younga, a junior high school student; translated)

Throughout the lessons, students were willing to make suggestions to their teachers, and to indicate disagreements with them. They often asked questions to clarify the procedures of the project and actively led the discussions. They did not always wait to be told what to do, but rather they asked “Can we decide the topic and move on now?” They often asked for help, but it did not mean that they were always obedient to the teachers’ suggestions; they did not hesitate to make such suggestions as “Can we reschedule the report after midterm?” and “Can you make the e-mail message shorter so that we can easily remember what we need to do?”
The discussion period after the group presentation on “Plastic Surgeries” in the senior high school class was further illustrative of this:

Teacher (Jinho): Was the presentation clear enough? Did you understand what their points are?
Students: Yes.
Jinho: Then why do you not ask questions? If you understood what they said, you must have something to talk about it, I think.
Seho: The presentation was too perfect [to ask questions]. (The class laughed)
Jinho [who definitely did not agree that the presentation was that perfect] In what way?
Seho: The poster showed us everything. I mean, the poster presented what they wanted to tell very well and I could understand their points. And I agree with them [and therefore do not have any question].
Jinho: I see…

Jinho was not very happy that the students did not bring up many questions, which he thought was expected as a sign of sincere participation and comprehension. The students, however, explicitly said that they were happy about the presentation, which was why they did not ask questions, challenging Jinho’s view that good understanding led to asking questions.

The first reading in the junior high school class was about a student who had a conflict with her teacher at school: the teacher was not happy with the student’s cleaning job although the student thought that she did a good job. In the discussion that followed, students shared their own experiences of conflict with their teachers and how they resolved such conflicts. The following quote illustrates their perspectives on student-teacher dialogue.

Kumju: I think the student in the story was very rude. How could she use such a word to her teacher?
Eunhee: I agree. But I also understand both. The student thought that she did her best although the teacher did not agree. People have different opinions.
Hyunjung: How would you deal with the situation then?
Eunhee: I will just listen to the teacher… it is just easy you know. And will redo the work as the teacher asked. But I will feel sorry that she did not recognize my hardwork.
Sohee: I won’t do that. I will not do cleaning again if I think I did my best. I will tell the teacher my opinion.

The following two comments students made to their teacher, Jinho, in the (written) end-of-year high school evaluations are also illustrative of contemporary Korean students’ willingness to challenge their teachers:
I don’t like your teaching style. I have once had a teacher like you. I learned a lot from him and liked it. But I don’t think that this year was the right time for doing this kind of thing. You said that “If you study English only for entrance exam in this school, isn’t it a shame?” But I think that if we get even one question wrong in the entrance exam in this school, it is more shameful. So I felt another stress for real English other than stress for English for the entrance exam in this class. It was too much for tenth graders, I think. As we will study English for the whole life of us, there is enough time for doing things like this in the future, I think. (Sangkyu, a high school student, end of school-year evaluation; translated)

Dialogue was active among students as well. They were willing to clarify others’ comments, ask questions, and reveal disagreements. The following is from the discussion after the presentation on the topic of ‘jong’; the Korean students did not avoid confronting each other.

Sangbum: The topic for this class is “current Korean culture.” I don’t know whether you discuss modern aspect of Korean culture. How does jong represent current Korean culture?
Taeho (one of the presenters): I think Korean people still have jong in their mind although it is disappearing with industrialization.
Sangbum: I still think your presentation is too abstract and you could have included some concrete examples of jong in today’s Korea. And I am not sure if it is a [good representative of] Korean culture.
Taeho: Well, other countries have similar thing like affection but they don’t have things like our jong. That is my point.

Students from both classes highly valued class discussions as opportunities to “listen” to the thoughts of their peers and to broaden their views, a view which is consistent with the traditional valuing in Korean culture of listening and learning from others which co-exists uneasily with also traditional hierarchical characteristics of Korean culture. However, student appreciation of learning from each other warrants a better recognition, as it means the hierarchical class structure has started to shift into a more egalitarian one (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor, 1996). Having two teachers in the high school class facilitated this transformation of power structure in the classroom, as students could “listen to different perspectives so they were not influenced by a single opinion” (as one student wrote).

Overall, students enjoyed learning through dialogue and only one student mentioned that it was less effective than learning by lecture. I next discuss how the dialogue could foster critical understanding of the chosen issues.
Critical dialogue

Although students revealed varying degrees of critical awareness of the issues depending on their own experiences (cf. Crookes & Lehner, 1998), my co-teachers and I were able to engage students in sophisticated dialogue using discussion and writing as vehicles for thinking. In line with the emphasis on “the development of critical thinking” as “the primary concern of educational programs” (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p. 259), brainstorming was used as a tool for problem-posing to invite student ideas and critical reflection on the issues. For example, in the junior high school class, the student presentations showed that students had strong idealizations of some parts of the world. So in the discussion following the presentations, I asked them to pinpoint on the map the places they chose. I then invited their thoughts about the distribution of the places. The student answers included “There is no place in Africa” and “They are all rich and developed countries.” I invited words or expressions to describe the places chosen and people living there, which generated “rich, convenient, English, powerful, individual, famous, ethnocentrism.” I then did the same thing for those places not chosen and the answers included “poor, dirty, illness, drugs, danger, colonized countries, not famous, AIDS, unfamiliar, natural resources.” Writing all of these words on the board and looking at them, I asked the students to see if there was any contradiction. For example, we talked about why Asia was in the group described as “unfamiliar” while Korea is in Asia. I also asked if they would agree if someone else describes Korea that way, which drew the answer “Things are relative and not everything, even in the same country, is the same.” This easily led us to move onto discussion of stereotypes, including racial issues. We then talked about examples of stereotypes in our own lives. The following data extract is an example of the moderately sophisticated dialogue that often occurred:

Hyunjung: Then can you think of any examples of this in your lives?
Kyunghée: At school, people often think that if you are good at studying, you are a good person. And if you are not good at studying, people often have prejudice, I mean, they don’t think that you can do other things well. I don’t like it.
(Other students agree): Right…
Hyunjung: Hmm, you mean you feel bad when other people have prejudice against you, right? Then, can you think of any examples of the stereotypes you have toward other people?
Jiyun: When I go to the language school, we have black teachers then I think something strange… I don’t know why… but I just feel that they may not be good teachers.
Hyunjung: You mean you think that their English is not good enough?
Jiyun: No… I don’t know exactly. I know that it is not good but I just feel that way, you know... Because of the LA riot, and the movies … maybe that’s why… Well I think they may feel bad…
Eunhee: I think that is a stereotype. There are many social problems in the US as well but we think of it as a rich country in general, and make a judgment from the external factors.

The senior high school students also reported that they found brainstorming very helpful to develop and organize their ideas in English for writing. For example, one of the groups I worked with during group discussion before presentations was talking about ‘dyeing hair’. At first they brainstormed the expressions they could think of about ‘dyeing’, which included “adults’ prejudice, trend, identity, individuality, imitate, America, Japan, and westernization.” Then each student made one sentence out of the expressions, such as “Koreans dye their hair because they want to look like westerners,” “My parents have prejudice about dyeing” and “Dyeing is one symbol of freedom.” The discussion continued as follows:

Hyunjung: Then what about thinking about yourself? Why do you like it [dyeing]?
Heeju: I like it because adults prevent it.
Jiwon: You know, it is freedom. Actually in Korea students (officially) can dye their hair when they enter university, when they can be free from parents and school rules. So they want to express themselves in that way.
Junki: What about “imitate?”
Heeju: We see many movie stars and singers dyeing their hair on TV. We want to look like people we like.
Junki: Following trend…
Hyeri: (pointing to Heeju) She’s got a hair-cut like [popular singer] Mun-heejun.
Hyunjung: Then isn’t there a certain contradiction among what you said? What do you think? You dye your hair to express yourself but you do that because others do the same thing…?
Junki: I think it’s true. In fact, many people want to look the same way so I prefer not to dye my hair.

The next example is from the group who chose “Early English Education” as their topic, which, at the time, was one of the most controversial issues in recent Korean language policy. The presentation showed that they were aware of a tension between the desire to preserve a country’s own culture and language and the desire to promote English proficiency (cf. Jung & Norton, 2002). The discussion in English (partly excerpted in the next data extract) lasted about seven minutes, almost without the teachers’ intervention.

Minhee: Learning English is not a problem. Learning other languages can help us learn more about our language.
Mina: But language represents culture.
Minhee: Learning another language doesn’t hurt our culture. For example, some countries in Europe have four official languages but they are maintaining good culture and cultural heritage.

Jaehun: I think that it is a very special case. If children learn our native language and other second language at the same time, they will have some confusion.

Mina: In our Korean class, we learned … I mean, we often translate Korean sentences like English sentences.

Minhee: But the problem is not English. The real problem is that people are belittling our language and think that English is superior to Korean. So instead of lowering the importance of English, we should try to think more about our language so that we can learn both well.

Mina: Right. We should create atmosphere to tell them our mother tongue is also important. So it’s our responsibility to make that atmosphere.

Junho: Well, to be good at English, to start learning it earlier is better…but our mother tongue is better than English.

Minhee: It is not better. Both are important. What I’m saying is that we should change our attitude.

Mina: We need to learn both anyway. We should create atmosphere to tell people our mother tongue is also important. So it’s our responsibility to make that atmosphere.

The students addressed many educational issues throughout the discussion, which were closely related to their lives. For further illustration, take hakwon, which three groups chose as their topic, as an example:

We chose this topic because many students in Korea go to hakwon and we think that it best represents the characteristics of Korean education. First, we think that many Korean students go to hakwon not because they need to go but because others go…. In modernization period, Chosun Dynasty was on the position of totally one-sided acceptance of western culture and could not do anything creatively. This tendency have passed to modern Korea…After independence from Japan, we made an effort to develop our economy so our parents’ generation didn’t have enough chance to study…and our parents want to make their children study more and go to more and more hakwon… It’s the result of excessive competition which is caused by lack of natural resources. (a group report before presentation at the high school)

While this group looked at the issue from historical perspectives, another group approached the topic more as an educational issue, which was closely related to their own lives:
This is very unique in Korea. Most students in Korea go to *hakwon* after school. Foreigners don’t understand this so we will talk about it. Positive aspects are students can exchange information between the schools and the others, we can make friends with other students as well. Negative aspects are we need much money to go there. Also we can regard *hakwon* more important than school. There are too many *hakwons* in Korea and we don’t know whether we should go or not and also where to go. And we have to spend much time even during the weekend. The more we study at *hakwon*, the more tired we are at school. Then we can’t enjoy our lives. (a group presentation at the high school)

The topics they chose included the topic of North Korea, which had been a taboo to talk about in Korean society before. The discussion suggested that the students recognized the political context of education:

After the 6.15 summit talk last year, there was once Kimjongil syndrome in South Korea. For example, Kim’s glasses became very popular among young people (although it’s an old style) and so did his hairstyle. Also, internet music site shows that some North Korean songs are unbelievably popular. Sometimes we can even hear these songs on the street. North Korean dialect is popular on TV. We couldn’t imagine this before. We can find the reasons in the problem of ideology and history. In 1970s and 1980s, government and many teachers teach children anti-communism and we always had negative image of North Korea. So we think that education is partly the reason why this syndrome occurred. Before the 6.15 summit, many people thought that he is so closed man, but at that time he showed us many good images, and our image and thinking about North Korea has changed. So we think that it is necessary to see North Korean people objectively, not too friendly, but not with too much hostility. (a group report before presentation at the high school)

The discussion of plastic surgeries addressed the social/gendered aspects of the issue, that is, gender inequality in a patriarchal society:

Eunhye: You said that it is the person’s choice but I think our society has made them get a surgery. What do you think about it?
Minsuk: Yes, I talked about the society’s pressure to make a surgery before. Did you pay attention to that? (Students laugh.) Yes, there is a pressure in Korean society, especially for women, and …so…it is a complex matter.
Hyunjung: So you’re saying that the problem is not just individual but social. Is that right?
Minsuk: I think… there is something wrong in the society as a whole. Basically getting a plastic surgery is the individual’s choice. But I think something is wrong in that too many people are trying to get the surgery.
Jisu (another presenter): But I think it is good if the person can get the confidence back after the surgery. So we should let the person make a choice.
Hyunjung: Then do you think people will feel confident enough after the surgery even though other people don’t like their new appearance?
Jisu: No, I don’t think so.
Hyunjung: Then is the choice really up to the individual?
Jisu: Maybe not…
Hyunjung: (Drawing attention to the gender of the character in the poster)
  Look at the poster. Why do you have a woman here in the picture not a man?
Eunhye: It’s usually women who are interested in plastic surgery.
Hyunjung: Have you thought about why?
Dongkyu: To look beautiful is more important to women than to men in the society.
Hyunjung: Why?
Minsuk: You know, when you apply for a job, appearance is important for women, not for men. It’s not fair.

At both schools, the adolescent students could address social issues from a critical perspective. In their reflective writing, they reported that this group project nurtured their consciousness as well as provided them with an opportunity to look at familiar topics from a different perspective:

When I first thought about this topic, I couldn’t think of anything particular about current Korean culture, which made me think about myself and Korean society a lot. It was very nice to hear from other students what they think about something I didn’t really think important before. I was surprised to see that they have very deep understanding of the topic. (Hoyoung, a high school student; translated)
I really learned a lot in this class. Of course in terms of English but the more important thing to me was, by thinking of “Korean culture”, I could look at other cultures from broader perspective and therefore I could have my own view toward “culture.” When I write a letter to my pen pal in Italy next time, I will be able to introduce Korean culture better. (Jihun, a high school student)
The discussion about stereotype was very interesting and everybody was very active and enthusiastic. I could think about things I didn’t pay attention much before and I was surprised to see that I myself had such a prejudice and stereotype to many things. (Dohee, a junior high school student; translated)

Critical dialogue in English
“Language,” as a medium of fostering student critical awareness and action, should be given particular attention in S/FL classrooms (Crookes & Lehner,
Morgan (1998) states that critical ESL pedagogy “doesn’t mean neglecting language. It means organizing language around experiences that are immediate to students” (p.19, as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 15). Then, how can we provide opportunities for learners to develop English language abilities while reflecting on critical issues? Or, given the traditional emphasis on the forms of language in Korean EFL classrooms, how can we incorporate critical themes into language instruction, rather than incorporating language into critical issues?

In both schools, the students reported that the biggest challenge was how to express their thoughts on difficult topics in English, even though they liked the nature of the classes and the dialogic process of learning very much. As the classes were led (mostly) in English in an EFL context, however, most students appreciated that they could use English “in the modes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in the dialogic process” (Crawford-Lange, 1981, p. 261). So they learned “why they need to study English” and “how to use the English they had learned in other English classes.”

Group work was very effective in these large classrooms. Students in the same group successfully corrected and helped with each other’s vocabulary. They were more active in asking questions in groups (both of the teacher and of their peers) than in the whole class environment.

In order to engage them in attempting to communicate, given that “understanding dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” presupposes a “curiosity about the very elements of the dialogue” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 382), it was important to find topics which were of interest to the students. This, in turn, highlights the value of learner-produced materials. The high school students showed great interest in investigating the topic(s) they had chosen. The junior high school students were very active when they presented the PowerPoint materials they made. Reflecting on these events, typical student comments were:

Today’s discussion was excellent. The students liked their PowerPoint materials very much. It was particularly good when Kumju showed some pictures she had taken in Canada. The students wanted to hear more from her and they had lots of questions and comments to each other. (field notes)

The good thing about this class was the students and the teacher discuss together and dialogue is the main thing in class, so we deal with the topic what we are interested in, not the one from the textbooks and the participation was much more active. (Eunhee, a junior high school student; translated)

Student-generated materials based on their own experiences and concerns increased student ownership of their learning and facilitated the increasing use of English in different modes in the dialogical process. Most of all, I interpret this experience as having helped these EFL learners feel confident in their abili-
ties to communicate in English, as indicated by a range of comments of which the following examples are typical:

We could use English in real situation so we could use what we’ve learned in other class. Contrary to traditional English classes, in this class, through the group work, presentation and discussion on the topic, we could study English more interestingly. And it made me feel close to English. (Jisuk, a high school student; translated)

The topic was about current Korean culture, where we belong, so it was more familiar and interesting. Also, each group talks about something they chose, so it was not that difficult to express my ideas in English. When the classmates were presenting the topics, as they were familiar to me and interesting, I could understand them better, although my English is not very good. (Hyesu, a high school student; translated)

The particular focus of language instruction in the class was how to help the students organize and develop their ideas and express themselves in oral and written English. Regarding speaking and writing abilities, which have been neglected in traditional English classrooms in Korea, I could see that the students became aware of the importance of using language to create and exchange ideas, which in turn led them to gain better linguistic competence. Typical student comments on this point are as follows:

The best thing I gained from this class is that I couldn’t imagine writing an essay in English before but now I can write a page, although I am not sure if it is confidence or mere familiarity. At first, it was difficult to listen to, understand and speak in English but while “using English to do something,” we had to actually use the vocabulary and grammar we learned in other classes. I could incorporate what I’ve learned about English into my own thinking in this class. (Eunkyung, a high school student; translated)

I think that I didn’t study English as a “language” until I took this class because I was used to English class for memorization. While writing and speaking about my own view for different topics, I could feel that my thinking improved and naturally my English improved. I mean, I realized that I need to think before I speak. Through the discussion, I could have critical view toward the topic so I came to have more things that I want to express so I could speak English naturally. (Taehun, a high school student, end of school-year evaluation; translated)

These last quotes in particular echo a remark of Wallerstein (1983, p. 10): “Our students don’t just need to learn English; they need English so they can learn.”
Teacher-researcher’s reflection

“The power that uses power to share and transform power is the power I am seeking” (Shor, 1996, p. 20). Having analyzed student responses to the class, I now reflect on how much I was ready to relinquish my authority and share power with the students and what I, as a teacher, have learned through this classroom practice. Although Pennycook (2001) claims that self-reflexivity is inherent in the notion of being “critical” (as represented in Spivak’s (1993, p. 25) comment: “By ‘critical’ I mean a philosophy that is aware of the limits of knowing”), despite their emphasis on the transformation of power in class through teachers becoming learners among learners, studies of critical pedagogy do not adequately present teachers’ own learning and reflection during the practice.

As young beginning learners, students wanted to learn English through fun activities, although they knew that this class was not merely for free talking or games. They expected “something different” from other English classes, but they were not sure what they exactly wanted. Student comments revealed that they were not resistant to the kind of class with a discussion format nor did they show a desire for traditional instruction at all. Even at the senior high school, students strongly supported learning through dialogue, although they commented that what they learned in this class was less directly related to their preparation for the entrance exam.

Interestingly, the end of the year evaluations from the senior high school students showed a contrasting result. After “Current Korean Culture,” they studied “British Culture,” where Jinho provided some reading materials about the topic before students did their research and presentations, which was used for a written reading comprehension test as part of the evaluation. Most of the students mentioned this test as the biggest complaint about the course, which they felt required mere memorization of information.

The main suggestions from the students were about the different English proficiency levels among the students and institutional constraints such as time limitation, workload, and schedule conflicts with other school events. Despite our concern and effort, while students who had good command of English mostly found the class “rather tough and challenging” but “meaningful and memorable”, those whose English was not very good found it to be a burden:

I am not good at speaking English but since I had to do everything in English in this class, it helped improve my English a lot. (Eunsu, a high school student)

I like the word “creative.” I have never taken this kind of class before. It was so different and interesting. But my lack of English proficiency was the problem. My English is so bad that I sometimes think that this kind of class is only for those students who speak English well. You may not understand how painful it is not to be able to express what you want to talk. The as-
assignments, especially writing, could have better reflected the concern of those students whose English is not very good. (Hyejin, a high school student; translated)

The students themselves, however, provided some suggestions on this issue at the same time:

I think that I was lucky to be exposed to this kind of class, although I couldn’t understand everything. The class was not led only for those who speak English well but we were given preparation time in advance so I could speak too. (Minsu, a high school student; translated)
I thought that this kind of class is only possible when I go to college. It was a very special experience. But if you ask students’ opinion when you decide the topics, it will be better. When we deal with the topic we choose, it will be more interesting and we will be able to more actively participate. (Jiun, a high school student, end of school-year evaluation; translated)

The students also reported that they thought the teacher’s qualifications, enthusiasm, and well-preparedness were the most important factors in the success of the class. This highlights the importance of having good teachers equipped with solid philosophy and fostering teacher autonomy in implementing critical pedagogy:

The teacher understood students’ thoughts very well and was good at sharing her ideas with the students. So I felt comfortable talking about my ideas and didn’t get nervous in speaking in English. (Hyemin, a junior high school student, translated)

I think this class was successful because we had two active teachers. They helped each other and helped the students and listened to us very well. (Se-hun, a high school student, translated).

Conclusion: Going beyond an experiment
The study, then, suggests that there is enough room for critical dialogue in Korean EFL classrooms even with the existing institutional constraints. Korean adolescent students in beginning EFL classrooms could be active participants in a dialogic learning process dealing with critical issues, when prompted by an appropriate curriculum context and a safe climate for discussion and writing that invites thinking. Of course, the Korean EFL classrooms in public secondary schools are not ideal sites for dialogic pedagogy, but the challenges they present mostly result from institutional constraints similar to those in public schools in many Western countries (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1995), not to mention, of course, the lack of English proficiency of the students as beginning EFL learners. The challenges, however, are not inherent in the culture.
An important related point is the changing nature of Korean English classrooms. First, current Korean elementary classrooms, with their new communicative English program, are different from traditional classrooms (as Jung & Norton, 2002, document). Second, many Korean teachers frequently use group activities in their classes to overcome the problem of large class size, contrary to the traditional image of lecturing in class. Third, due to the crisis in public education in general and the emergence of many private language institutes, teachers are not now perceived as the only possessor of knowledge any more.

With fixed curricula and the ever-present pressure of the college entrance exam, it is true that the textbook tends to “become the curriculum” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 21, emphasis in original) but individual teachers do have a certain measure of freedom of action. Teachers can make small changes, for example, by incorporating a small lesson on critical issues into existing curriculum (cf. Pennycook, 2001), and, as I found, the possibilities are much greater at the extra-curricular level.

In light of this, helping teachers to perceive just what degree of freedom they have, in what respects (empowering teachers) through teacher education and networking should be the initial emphasis in attempts to implement any critical pedagogy. It is not easy to be a dialogical teacher because it requires a lot of work and “the simple acceptance of underlying philosophy does not guarantee the ability to act out the implications of that philosophy” (Crookes & Lehner, 1998, p. 384). In addition, not many teachers themselves have been exposed to critical pedagogy yet. Jung & Norton (2002) illustrated that enthusiastic teachers supported by a local teachers’ group were successful with a new, quite communicative, EFL curriculum for elementary students in Korea. The importance of the role of networking in empowering teachers as agents of change was also demonstrated in an interview study with Korean teachers (Shin, in press). Teachers equipped with relevant knowledge, courage and patience (cf. Wink, 1999) then need to work on curriculum reconstruction.

In relation to this, the importance of collaborative materials development with students as well as among teachers also needs a better recognition. Considering that materials that mirror student experiences and voices are important as resources to teachers, the development of materials in an electronic data-base would substantially help teachers working in diverse contexts. Incorporating student self-assessment into performance-based testing also presents a possibility to address the ever-present challenge of testing. If we, as teachers, are concerned about education for change, transformative education inside the classroom should accompany action outside the classroom (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987), and we can make a change in our own classrooms.

It is not my intention, however, to present critical pedagogy as yet another panacea for the problems of Korean EFL classrooms. Rather, I found Pennycook (2001) persuasive in his arguing for “the creative expansion of possibilities” of combining two elements “to create something larger than the sum of its parts” (p. 9). Like him, I could see parallels between the educational philosophy in...
critical pedagogy and what we might call the “indigenous critical educational philosophy” embodied in many educational practices in Korea, although they “may not be called the same thing” (p. 171); teachers who are already implementing such critical aspects of traditional Korean educational practices “just don’t know that they know” (Wink, 1999, p. 33; discussed in more detail in Shin & Crookes, 2005).

This study was a small scale investigation and each classroom constitutes its own unique environment which reflects its own social and historical context. A critical pedagogy of EFL in Korea might be expected to differ from Freire’s popular education or participatory programs in ESL contexts (and there can be no one critical pedagogy even across different Korean EFL classrooms). The interventions we have discussed here are reported in the hope that they may provoke thought and action at an interface between language, a specific culture (or perhaps, a set of educational subcultures), and an alternative curriculum.

Crawford-Lange (1981) stated the primary goal for Freirean educational experience is “creative action on the part of the learners” (p. 261). Yet action may take different forms in each classroom with different curriculum contexts and students. Therefore, any evaluation of such an experience should focus on “the ability of the educational program to . . . foster transforming action in a particular time and place” (p. 267, my emphasis). In addition, Crookes & Lehner (1998) suggest that we cannot expect too much from the first experience with a critical approach, especially in an unfamiliar context, as making a difference takes time. Before concluding, however, I would like to draw from one student’s comment from the course evaluation in my study:

The discussion broadened my view. I just took things as they were given to me before but could look at things from different perspectives through the discussion. I was shocked that I myself had that kind of stereotype. . . . When I saw the Southeast-Asian workers getting together in downtown before, I feared them. They looked dirty and dangerous… I don’t think that there will be a sudden change of action but when I see those people downtown next time, I may look at them from different perspective. Or, maybe, I will say “Hi” to them. (Course evaluation, Minju, a junior high school student; translated)

In addition, we hope that this study calls into question the stereotype of East Asian students as passive and non-autonomous and helps dispel the myth about East Asian classrooms as rigidly hierarchical, in the same way that the learning experience in this study successfully dispelled the stereotype that this student had about the Southeast-Asian workers in Korea. We hope that in providing suggestions for classroom processes in EFL junior and high school contexts it constitutes a partial answer to the question some might ask about critical pedagogy in “the East”: Can it be done? Sure, it can.
Notes
1. At the time of this study, Shin was an experienced Korean high school teacher of English completing a MA in ESL, with an interest in exploring the feasibility of a critical pedagogy in Korean contexts. Crookes is an academic working in the U.S. who has a general interest in radical pedagogies and experience of teaching in East and South East Asia, including high school.
2. The idea of making a travel plan which would involve investigating the topic of stereotypes was settled on after an informal meeting with the students, in which I found out that many of them were interested in traveling and getting to know more about other countries. In fact, some of them had visited some other countries, and others were actually planning trips to foreign countries during the summer. So the countries they chose to research included either places they wanted to visit or places they visited and liked a lot.
3. This reflects pre-existing institutional requirements of the larger course within which this initiative was carried out. (This is sort of thing is not consistent with classic Freirean aspirations for student-directedness; but cf. Shor (1992, 1996) on the compromises necessary to carry out this sort of pedagogy even within a U.S. community college; and Auerbach, 1992, Ch. 4, on “ways in” to a participatory approach.) We were pleased to find students questioning certain aspects of the structure of the course; given more time with this approach we think they would have developed their willingness to question wider structural aspects of their classes and school.
4. On this point, our compromise with a classic Freirean position was that we specified an overarching topic (culture) and then students made choices within it. Although the students chose their own topics for this lesson, we were deliberate in emphasizing “current” Korean culture because discussion about culture, which is one of the most critical issues of our time, must be dealt with from the concrete reality of learners’ own life experiences. Also, as it is usually not easy for young students to say what their culture is like, we thought this topic would be appropriate to debate various positions without imposing any, while developing the tools for critical understanding of reality (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1995).
5. This module consisted of “American Culture”, “Culture Bump”, and “Korean Culture”, followed by “British Culture” in the second semester.
6. A Korean term for married women often with a negative connotation of women who lose their (physical) attractiveness after marriage.
7. The following data excerpts (from student written work) illustrates that the chosen topics were closely related to the life situation of the students, which they saw as problematic:

We chose the college entrance exam – competition for college entrance – as our topic. Our education is hopeless. In Korea, intense competition for entering college causes pain to high school students. We have to memorize so many things without deeply thinking about them, just to do well on the test.
The goal is to go to college, not to pursue true learning. Extra-curricular activities are forced to make the situation better, but they are in fact used as another time when we learn the main subjects such as math, English and so on. We need to spend lots of money for private lessons to prepare for the exam. The whole education is too much focusing on the entrance exam and we high school students are under stress every day. It makes us tired. We think it is much more serious in Korea than in other countries, and we think it is very important to us students. So we would like to investigate and present this issue [as a group report at the high school].

Many groups chose issues related to teen-age culture:

Compared to other countries, we have so many cell phones in Korea. Even elementary school students often carry it. We can easily see many people exchange text message everywhere, particularly many teen-agers. We think it represents a certain aspect of Korean culture and think that it would be meaningful to explain this. [a group report at the high school]

8. These comments were written in Korean. The Korean word that translates as “critical” [bipanjok] was actually used by many students – ‘critical thinking’ is a buzz word in Korean education, although (as is also the case when it is used in English) it is not generally used in the sense of critical theory.
9. The discussion was led primarily in English, but the students sometimes mixed Korean at this point. In the example quote which follows, I have translated a few Korean phrases so as to render it entirely in English.
10. Many young Koreans have recently dyed their hair, whereas many adults still do not like it and think of it as mere idolization of western culture or imitation of entertainers. Although many students have their hair dyed, many secondary schools have school rules prohibiting students from dyeing their hair.
11. I mentioned to the junior high school students that they could use Korean in class if necessary but many students in fact kept trying to speak only in English. When the later discussion on the topic of stereotypes required quite sophisticated terms, they mixed Korean with English, but some of them still tried to use English as much as they could.
12. This contrasts with the students’ excitement about their own chosen topic in “Current Korean culture” lesson.
13. They had the advantage, of course, of government-developed and supported series of multimedia textbooks, accompanied by audio tapes, videotapes, and a teacher’s guide, for communicative English programs (Jung & Norton, 2002).
14. The evaluation of “English culture” class consisted of a written test (60%) and a performance-based test (40%). The student self assessment was incorporated into written reports (reflective writing), which were included in the performance-based test.
References