

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.

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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

macro sociopolitical, cultural context, they learn to make decisions in and outside the classroom and can eventually take actions outside the classrooms.

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.¹

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 e-mail 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 S. 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.² 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.³ There was a required text, but additional readings were assigned as the course developed. The lesson Jinho and I designed for "Current Korean culture",⁴ as part of the second module of "Target culture and Own culture"⁵ 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*⁶), unique aspects of Korean culture (public bathroom, dog-meat soup) and contemporary teen-age culture (cell phones, popular culture).⁷ 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 critical⁸ 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 probably 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.⁹

Hyunjung: Then can you think of any examples of this in your lives?

Kyunghee: 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 ‘dying hair’¹⁰. At first they brainstormed the expressions they could think of about ‘dying’, 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 dying” and “Dying is one symbol of freedom.” The discussion continued as follows:

Hyunjung: Then what about thinking about yourself? Why do you like it [dying]?

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 dying 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 & Leher, 2002).

1998). 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.”¹¹

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 abilities 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 class 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 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 better¹². 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. (*Sehun*, 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ If we, as teachers, are concerned about education for change, transform 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 [Authors, submitted]).

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 con-

texts it constitutes a partial answer 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 choose 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 teenagers. We think it represents a certain aspect of Korean culture¹ 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 incorpo-

rated into written reports (reflective writing), which were included in the performance-based test.

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