Exploring Native Speaker Teachers’ Beliefs about Learning and Teaching English

Shinhye Kim
(Keimyung University)


The present study investigated native speaker teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching English in the Korean university setting. Despite the great influx of native speaker teachers into the Korean English education system, relatively little research has been carried out on teachers’ perspectives on learning and teaching. Considering the significant impact of teachers’ beliefs in the classroom, this study investigated the sources of teachers’ beliefs, their beliefs about learning and teaching, and their beliefs about teacher roles in the second language classroom. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight native English speakers who were teaching at the same university. The findings showed that the teachers believed students’ active participation was the key to successful second language learning. It was shown that the teachers’ beliefs were closely associated with their prior learning experiences and that differences in the learning experiences between the teacher and students may cause difficulty in the second language classroom. These findings suggest the importance of teachers’ awareness of students’ learning experiences and the need to negotiate within the given teaching context without completely giving up teachers’ own beliefs about learning and teaching a second language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers’ beliefs and values based on previous experiences in learning and teaching constitute an important part of teacher knowledge and serve as a basis for teaching in a given context. Tension in the classroom may occur when teachers and students do not share similar learning and teaching cultures. In the course of resolving such tension in the classroom, teachers’ beliefs and knowledge may be reflected, challenged, and (re)constructed in order to make sense of what they have done in the classroom. As a social approach to teacher development sees the construction of teachers’ personal theories
of teaching closely rooted in the local context, it is essential to examine the teaching context in order to understand teachers’ beliefs and modifications made to those beliefs within the given context.

Since the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology started the EPIK (English Program in Korea) program in 1995, there has been a great influx of native speaker teachers (NS teachers, hereafter) in both public schools and private institutes in Korea. This trend also holds true in universities with 3,815 native teachers currently teaching at 4-year universities (Korean Education Development Institute, 2010). Despite the increased number of NS teachers, issues concerning NS teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching, their theoretical stance, and difficulties or problems they may experience due to different expectations between teachers and students in regarding classroom practice have rarely been investigated. While recent studies have focused on Korean teachers’ perceptions of teaching English through English (e.g. Cho & Nahm, 2009; Jeon, 2008; Min, 2008), relatively little research has been conducted on NS teachers, especially at the college level. Previous studies on NS teachers have mainly investigated the effectiveness of co-teaching practice (e.g. Choi, 2009; Kim, M., 2010; Kim & Kwak, 2002; Park, 2010). However, these studies have primarily focused on Korean teachers’ perspectives on co-teaching and their evaluation of NS teachers without much attention to the perspectives of the NS teachers involved in the teaching context.

Considering the fact that the majority of communication-focused English classes at universities are taught by NS teachers, it is important to investigate what the NS teachers believe about learning and teaching a second language, and how they change or modify their beliefs and practices for the context in which they teach. Teacher beliefs have been studied in general educational research (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Pajares, 1992) and some studies (e.g. Chin, 2002; Kim, H., 2003) in the area of second language education used the BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, Horwitz, 1985), which was originally developed to investigate learner beliefs. Studies have shown that teachers’ beliefs play a vital role in teachers’ decision making and practices (Peacock, 2001) since teachers tend to have their students do the same things they believe effective. Research also showed that teacher beliefs can be changed over time though some beliefs tend to stay stable (Peacock, 2001; Polat, 2010; Shin, 2002). Naturally, most studies on teacher beliefs relied on a quantitative approach using the questionnaire as a main research tool. The findings on teacher beliefs, therefore, were limited to the discrete statements of the questionnaire without reflecting how teachers’ personal and contextual background have affected their beliefs about learning and teaching, how they are interacting in a given teaching context. Such issues are especially important for NS teachers in the EFL context since they bring in the classroom practices and beliefs based on their prior learning and teaching experiences. It is also important to investigate if their beliefs are matched with the
practices in their current teaching context, and how they negotiate the differences. Thus the present study recognizes the need for an in-depth investigation to explore NS teacher beliefs and attempts to reveal the construction and modification process of teacher beliefs through a qualitative approach. For this purpose, the study poses the following research questions:

- What are the sources of the NS teachers’ beliefs?
- How do the NS teachers perceive their teaching context?
- What do the NS teachers believe about learning and teaching?
- What do the NS teachers believe about their role in the EFL context?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional models of teacher education considered teachers as consumers of theories and models to be applied in language classrooms. Teaching was considered a set of discrete behaviors proven to be effective through empirical investigations. From this perspective, effective teachers were often defined in terms of how successfully they carried out tasks according to suggested procedures. However, this model gives little consideration to actual classrooms where teachers and students interact in various different ways and in different situations. Noticing such a gap, teacher education research has placed more emphasis on how teachers’ cognition, knowledge, and experiences influence and shape their teaching practices. This line of research began to highlight the ways teachers are shaped by their prior experiences as students (Peacock, 1999; Samimy & Lee, 1997), their personal, practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), their values and beliefs (Pajares, 1992), and the context in which they are engaged (Feryok, 2008; Mattheousdakis, 2007; Polat, 2010). Those studies recognized that “teachers are central to understanding and improving English language teaching” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 401), and teachers’ beliefs about teaching and past experiences as learners are “instrumental in shaping how they interpret what goes on in their classroom” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 401). In light of this emerging trend in teacher education, teacher education research has begun to acknowledge and the importance of teacher cognition, knowledge, and beliefs.

Studies on teacher beliefs have shown that they have a significant impact on teaching practices, and provide rationale for what teachers do in the classroom. That is, teachers’ beliefs function as a core reference point during the course of teaching, and provide a basis for actions and behaviors. This is well stated in Richards and Lockhart (1994):

What teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe, and that teacher
knowledge and “teacher thinking” provide the underlying framework or schema which guides the teachers’ classroom actions. (p. 29)

This statement illustrates the notion that teachers’ classroom actions reflect what teachers know and think, and this knowledge and thinking is a product of their previous learning experiences, and thus may be “personalized, idiosyncratic, and highly context specific” (Tsui, 2003, p. 61). Teachers tend to do things that they have observed; in what Lortie (1975) calls an “apprenticeship of observation” suggesting that teachers internalize their observed behavior and this strongly influences their teaching practices. Thus, what teachers do in the classroom cannot be fully understood without considering what they bring into the classroom, what they believe about learning and teaching, and how their beliefs are received in the classroom.

The majority of studies on teacher/student beliefs used Horwitz’s (1985) 34-item self-report questionnaire, BALLI, to assess the beliefs of teachers and learners. Peacock (1999) compared the beliefs of 202 students and 45 university ESL teachers and found notable differences in their beliefs about vocabulary and grammar. While students believed that learning a foreign language is a matter of learning a lot of new words and grammar rules, only a small percentage of teachers agreed. Samimy and Lee (1997) found similar results in a study of 34 students and 10 teachers. On the other hand, Breen (1991) observed that even the most experienced teachers in a master’s program considered language as a system rather than a means of communication despite their theoretical training. Kagan (1992) also found similar results in her review of 27 empirical studies on student teachers’ beliefs about learning. He found that the student teachers tended to use their theoretical knowledge to reinforce rather than challenge or change their prior beliefs and values. These results have significant implications since teachers who believe that language learning involves memorizing grammar and vocabulary may make their students spend most of their time on these activities (Horwitz, 1988).

Along with teachers’ prior experiences in learning and teaching, institutional expectation (Almarza, 1996), student expectation (Shamin, 1996), and formal teaching experience (Polat, 2010) were also found to have an impact on teachers’ beliefs. Feryok (2008) emphasized the role of contextual factors in the difference between teachers’ stated beliefs and observed teaching behaviors. Although teachers believe that they apply communicative teaching approaches to their classrooms, their teaching practices may not reflect what they claimed to believe. Her study showed that different expectations in different cultural settings may contribute to the divergence between cognition and practices, suggesting that such a gap requires teachers make an effort to search for balance between their ideas and student expectations.

The studies on teachers’ beliefs also investigated if teachers’ beliefs stay stable or
develop over time. Peacock (2001) used Horwitz’ BALLI to trace developmental changes with groups of teacher trainees. The results showed surprisingly little change over the three years on two beliefs about vocabulary and grammar, and about the role of intelligence in language learning. It was also found that the trainees’ beliefs remained at the same level of mismatch with experienced teachers’ beliefs. Similarly, Mattheousdakis (2007) also observed no significant change with adjacent years of pre-service teachers, but found an overall change between first year and the final year. He concluded that some beliefs remain stable while some are more readily changeable. On the other hand, based on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with the British specialists and the Chinese teachers participating in the teacher training program, Gu (2010) concluded that teachers learn from their experiences and gradually develop their competence as experts, and their growth of expertise is situation specific reflecting cultural characteristics. Similarly, Shin (2002) conducted interviews over a ten month period with seven Asian teachers (Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese) who were enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States. She found that the participants perceived their role as a friendly caregiver, which was the opposite image of a teacher as an authority figure in their traditional education system. It was their formal teachers who “impressed them” (p. 103) and had strong impact on their perception of good teachers. The beliefs derived from their memorable experiences tended to stay stable but overall, the participants did not exhibit dramatic changes with their beliefs about learning and teaching.

A majority of studies on teacher beliefs tended to be skewed in favor of the quantitative approach and did not give proper attention to teachers’ personal histories and contextual factors which may provide a better understanding of their beliefs. With the exception of a few studies (Feryok, 2008; Gu, 2010), more attention has been paid to the beliefs of pre-service teachers but relatively little research has been conducted with practicing teachers, especially with the NS teachers in the EFL context. Chin (2002) is one of the few studies on NS teachers’ beliefs in the EFL context. Using interviews and questionnaires, she showed that the NS teachers in a Korean university found that the students’ lack of confidence in English and their perfectionist complex were the major obstacles to improving their English. The NS teachers believed that making mistakes is necessary in second language learning and thus viewed their role as creating an environment in which students can participate in communication. While these studies described the Asian and NS teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching, and their perception of problems in the EFL classrooms, they did not describe how the individual teachers’ previous learning and teaching experiences and their cultural background contribute to their current beliefs about learning and teaching. The current study thus attempted to investigate the NS teachers’ beliefs on learning and teaching with the reference of their educational and cultural background.
III. METHOD

1. The Participants and the Setting

Eight native English speaker teachers, who were teaching at a four year university in one of the metropolitan cities in Korea, participated in this research. The researcher knew them prior to the study and asked them to volunteer for the study. Participants were selected considering their diversity in gender, nationality, and teaching experience in Korea. Only two teachers (Teacher A and Teacher E) had master’s degrees in TESOL when they started teaching at the current university. Teachers F and G had a master’s degree in political science and English literature respectively but did not have any formal teacher training when they started teaching in Korea. Teacher L later obtained a master’s degree in TESOL through a distance program while teaching at the current university. The other four teachers had a bachelor’s degree in different fields. Three teachers (Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher H) had a TESOL certificate while Teacher D and Teacher G had no formal TESOL training. Their teaching experiences were also diverse. Teacher A, Teacher C, Teacher E, and Teacher G had experience teaching nonnative English learners in their home country and/or in other countries. Teacher D, Teacher F, and Teacher H started teaching at private institutes (hagwons) in Korea while Teacher B was recruited to teach at an elementary school. Table 1 shows the profiles of the participating teachers.

TABLE 1
Profile of the Participating NS Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
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<td>IRE</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>CAN</td>
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<tr>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience in Korea</td>
<td>3.5 yrs</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>5.5 yrs</td>
<td>2 yrs</td>
<td>2.5 yrs</td>
<td>8 yrs</td>
<td>9 yrs</td>
<td>5 yrs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The average time that the eight teachers taught in Korea was 5.3 years. Teacher A and Teacher E were teaching skill-based courses and TESOL content courses to pre-service teachers in the English Education department. Teacher F and Teacher G were teaching conversation and composition classes in the English department. The other four teachers were teaching in the General English Program which provided a mandatory conversation course for all the freshmen students. All participating teachers knew each other through the academic and social events at the university, and they all once lived or were still living in
the on-campus apartment for the international faculty.

2. Data Collection

In order to gather teachers’ narratives of their learning and teaching experiences, interviews were conducted with individual teachers. The interview was semi-structured so as to provide general direction to their stories while at the same time allowing the interviewees to express themselves freely. All interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office and each interview took between 1 and 1.5 hours. The interview included questions regarding prior learning and teaching experiences, opinions on communicative language teaching, and difficulties and problems in the classroom (for the list of the questions, see Appendix). The interviews were recorded for transcription. The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the transcripts were sent to the interviewees for member checking. At this stage, the participating teachers were asked to read and correct any mistakes made during transcription and also to clarify the parts that were unintelligible or unclear to the researcher (these parts were highlighted). They were asked to add any comments at the end of their transcript to give a chance to elaborate on what they had said in the first interview. All teachers responded to the researcher with comments and corrections.

3. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed following the procedure suggested in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to find emerging patterns in the data. Grounded theory is a special kind of data analysis in qualitative research, which heavily focuses on generating a theory to explain a phenomenon. In accordance with the open coding procedure of grounded theory, the researcher read the transcripts and boldfaced seemingly important concepts. At this stage those important concepts were labeled in verbatim to avoid possible confusion with abstract categories. After the labeling, these concepts were placed under broad and general categories (e.g. learning experience, significant people, teaching experience, etc) to find more specific subcategories. Within these broader categories, concepts were regrouped to find subcategories and properties within those categories (e.g. under learning experience category, I put subcategories “go for it”, “be responsible”, “learner-centered” etc). At the next axial coding stage, the relationships among the subcategories were explored. This is the stage where the axis can provide a framework for finding a main storyline based on core categories. According to Salidana (2009), categories found through axial coding are integrated into a narrative centered on a core category. The present study used active participation as a core category to weave the other categories together into a story. A story
was constructed using the core category and subcategories to make sense of the teachers’ accounts of their beliefs, which provides the axis of teachers’ narratives (for the story, see Appendix).

After the preliminary data analysis, a peer debriefing session was conducted to validate the interpretation of the researcher and gain new insights on the analysis procedure. The session was organized with four colleagues who had a master’s or doctoral degree in TESOL. They were asked to read sample transcripts and to check if the codes and categories were matched with the data. Disputable codes and categories were marked and discussed for recoding. Through this process, the codes were checked and verified, and a tentative model of native speaker teachers’ beliefs in the Korean EFL setting was proposed. A detailed description of the findings is described below based on the categories found in the analysis.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Sources of Teacher Beliefs

The teachers’ beliefs about learning seemed to be closely associated with their personal and professional experiences in the past. In the present study, the teachers’ previous learning experiences, influential people, and theoretical orientation were mentioned as having a strong impact on their beliefs.

1) Prior Learning Experiences

Two teachers (Teacher A and Teacher E) described their learning experience in the spirit of “try it out and figure it out.” Their positive learning experiences were associated with a comfortable, creative, and free atmosphere which encouraged students to be creative while figuring things out. Teacher A described her learning experience at schools and at home in her home country as “learner-centered” and emphasizing the learner’s responsibility. She described her learning culture as follows:

(1) My NZ [New Zealand] style of learning was where learner-centeredness wasn’t a problem because most students, right from the kindergarten, experience learner-centeredness. So it’s not a problem to do it, it is never a problem in NZ to do that . . . This is your responsibility and you sort it out. (Teacher A, Interview on Sept 21, 2009)
Teacher A also mentioned that her experience in teachers’ college was similar in that it emphasized the learners’ creativity and responsibility so that she “would like to do more” even in her weak subjects. Similarly, Teacher E described the general atmosphere of his country as encouraging students to find what they like to do. He gave an example of his computer class experience as follows:

(2) So I was thinking about this computer programming class that I was doing, it’s all independent study kind of stuff, so there were days that the teacher was like whatever you are doing, get up and teach it to the class . . . I really liked that, I enjoyed it . . . For Americans, from the time when we are very young, learning is all about fostering interests and allowing people to pursue what they like. (Teacher E, Interview on Sept, 24, 2009)

In addition to the general learning atmosphere described above, it is also noticeable that the people who interacted with the NS teachers in that learning atmosphere played an important role in forming beliefs about learning. Teacher A depicted her learning experience at school as parallel to her mother’s approach to learning in the following excerpt:

(3) My mother was a very much a learner-centered mother. She would be like . . . yea go for it. She’s that kind of person. She’d also be like . . . mom can I have a cookie? And she’d say, if you must. It was my choice. That kind of thing. She made me very responsible at a very early age. So I felt that I could make mistakes, and she wouldn’t complain about anything. (Teacher A, Interview on Sept. 21, 2009)

Together with her schooling experience, these interactions with her mother led Teacher A to have strong beliefs about the individual learner’s will to learn, and the necessity of learners taking responsibility for their own learning, which she found essential to a learner-centered approach to teaching. Teacher D and Teacher H mentioned their parents’ influence on their teaching. Teacher D recalled his mother’s (who was also a teacher) use of jokes in the classroom and tried to be like her (“So I got a lot of my mom’s personality . . . And I don’t take myself too seriously”). Teacher H initially became interested in teaching by growing up in “a teaching household” and engaging in his parents’ dialogue centered on school life, which helped him to get a sense of what teachers do.

As pointed out in Horwitz (1988), teachers’ prior experience may have significant implications for their classroom activities as teachers tend to have their students do what they believe effective. Such a tendency was observed in the teachers’ comments on their
second language learning experiences. The NS teachers addressed particular methods or skills of their previous teachers (e.g., clear explanations for Teacher D, well-organized lectures for Teacher E, group work for Teacher H) and they wanted to apply a similar approach in their classes. For example, Teacher H reflected on his former French teacher as shown in the following excerpt:

(4) Learning French was kind of an ESL situation for me. I liked French a lot, I had good teachers. I tried to reflect on what my French teachers did, how I learned from them, and how that experience taught or helped me. I try to use some of the resulting strategies I extrapolated with my students. Well, for example, just some sort of group work, pair work, some individual work, some writing where students apply the grammar they learned from their books or some other form of information I gave them. (Teacher H, Interview on Sept. 22, 2009)

Similarly, Teacher D described that his Latin learning was enjoyable though he was not the best student in class because “the students are all my friends and the teacher was friendly. She had passion for teaching.” Likewise he tended to emphasize the teacher’s friendly attitude and relaxed atmosphere in the second language classroom. However, not all the participating NS teachers necessarily found their second language learning experiences positive. Their second language learning experiences were described as “noncommunicative” consisting of grammar translation and pattern-drill type activities (Teacher C, Teacher E, Teacher F, and Teacher G). They developed a strong dislike of memorization activities as they did not find them useful in their daily communication. As a result, they focused more on communication-based activities rather than grammar explanation in their classroom.

As the previous second language teachers were mentioned as having a strong influence on their teaching, it is natural that the participating teachers recalled their previous teachers when planning lessons or finding solutions to problems. Teacher G called this “summoning ghosts,” which suggests that the teachers he had at college and supervisors at work were an important source of what he does in his own classroom. He described it as follows:

(5) Even my students say, when I’m trying to explain something to them, I often bring up one good high school writing teacher or a couple of good writing professors that I had at the university, or Dr. Zou. I always, I’m always, you know, summoning those ghosts and trying to explain what they had tried to explain to me. (Teacher G, Interview on Oct 7, 2009)
It was suggested that the NS teachers tended to emphasize what they found positive and tried to do differently what they found unpleasant in their prior learning experiences. Encouraging learners to be creative and responsible for their learning, and creating interesting communicative language activities which avoid mechanical repetition was commonly emphasized by the NS teachers. The excerpts above show that teachers’ learning culture and their second language learning experiences may have contributed to teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching a second language.

2) Theoretical Orientation

All the participating teachers, except Teacher D, had received varying degrees of teacher training (from a diploma to a master’s degree) or had taught international students before starting to teach in Korea, and they tended to agree on the basic principles of communicative language teaching regardless of the variation in their teacher training backgrounds. Their idea of communicative language teaching was mostly expressed in terms of actual use of the language through interaction in the classroom. Teacher B was quite against the lecture-oriented class in this sense:

(6) The core of this approach I believe is that learners are seen as active participants in the construction of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of information provided by the teacher or the textbook. If you have a classroom, and the students all just sitting at their desk, with you lecturing I don’t know how much is getting through. In groups they interact with each sharing experiences and gain communication competence. (Teacher B, Interview on Sept. 22, 2009)

Among the NS teachers, Teacher F most specifically mentioned the significance of the teacher training program. He found the training useful as it provided him with a firm footing by providing resources and justifying the inclusion or exclusion of classroom activities. While describing the process of designing a writing syllabus, he referred to task-based instruction as a basic principle for teaching writing. He mentioned the theorists that influenced his writing syllabus as the following:

(7) I got that Joy Reid, Process of Composition, that’s where I got that first of all. I got quite a bit of advice from her that first year on writing. Since then, the person who has influenced me in terms of task is Peter Skehan, he was doing a lot of stuff a few years ago . . . I was reading at the time because I was doing the Birmingham thing, and both himself and Jane Willis are really big in the task-based world. (Teacher F, Interview on Sept 30, 2009)
As shown above, theoretical training helped the teachers “figure out the reasoning behind” (Teacher E) the methods or techniques used in the classroom though the teachers were not necessarily aware of trying to apply any particular theories. Instead, they tried to apply communicative language teaching in a broader sense. The NS teachers’ efforts to link their theoretical knowledge and actual classroom practice were not always successful and thus they tended to emphasize hands-on experiences in the classroom. The experience of what worked best in the classroom served as a primary source of information for lesson planning. For example, Teacher H pointed out that too much theory could only paralyze what teachers actually do in the classroom and that teacher’s classroom practice should have more priority over theories. Teacher B shared a similar concern and remarked that decontextualized teacher training programs without proper contextual information would not help teachers find effective methods for a given context. The findings indicated that the teacher’s theoretical knowledge gained in the teacher training programs can make sense only when it is contextualized by accommodating demands that are specific to the situations teachers are in. The findings also reiterated the point of the current teacher education theories that the teacher knowledge is not a simple collection of accumulated knowledge, but it is teachers’ reflection of what they learned through their learning and teaching experiences.

2. The Teaching Context

1) Freedom and Opportunities

Comparing their experiences at private institutes or other universities, the NS teachers found the curriculum of the courses they taught loosely structured and that they had maximum freedom when designing their own lessons. Those teachers in the General English Program generally followed the textbook-dictated curriculum which focused on daily conversation skills. It was up to the individual teachers, however, as to how to implement or supplement the textbook activities in their classes. Similarly, the teachers who were teaching content courses also found developing their own syllabi challenging, but interesting because it provided them with opportunities to develop their own designs and experiment with them. Teacher A welcomed this opportunity to be creative:

(8) So often, I’ll be told, here’s the course, go for it, you know, and everyone seems kind of happy. Then people just leave you alone, which is fantastic, that’s like a somewhat experienced teachers’ dream to be able to teach a class. And so for semi-experienced teachers, it’s fantastic, fantastic, not easy but I prefer that way. Maybe other people would always take a book and what I am I teaching and give
me a course . . . so I like to be able to be creative in my approach, it’s good for me. (Teacher A, Interview on Sept. 21, 2009)

The teachers also liked the various opportunities to participate in different programs at the university. Although it was not a requirement to teach outside of their department, they welcomed the opportunity to teach different subjects or different groups of students. Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher G enjoyed the chance to develop content-based courses for undergraduate students and Teacher A, Teacher E, and Teacher F took part in English teacher training programs offered for secondary school English teachers. The teachers found those opportunities useful in that they could experiment with ideas and gain new insights into teaching. They found such opportunities and freedom critical in improving their teaching skills and advancing their teaching career. It was shown that the teachers’ feeling of not being constrained by the school curriculum and administrative duties provided a sense of freedom. Teacher E expressed his desire not to get involved in the administration as follows:

(9) But in Korea, I was not hired to be an administrator, quite honestly, I don’t want to be, it’s a lot of responsibility so, you know, I don’t want to make it seem like I should have a voice about what’s happening in the department, because I don’t, that’s not my job. (Teacher E, Interview on Sept. 24, 2009)

The expectation that their role mainly involved teaching rather than administration combined with the fact that the participants lacked the Korean language skills necessary to deal with administrative matters allowed them to maintain a certain degree of distance from the Korean faculty and staff. It was described in the following excerpt:

(10) I habitually say hello to half of the professors in this building on a daily basis. We may not be great, best buddies, may not have ever had more than 2 minute conversation, but you know, we acknowledge each other, we know who each other are and stuff like that. We are to a certain extent involved in matters, departmental, don’t have as much influence as perhaps, there is no doubt that we don’t have as much influence as the Korean faculty do . . . But we are consulted over things that directly affect us. (Teacher F, Interview on Sept. 30, 2009)

Though the NS teachers did not find themselves playing a critical role in decision-making processes, they felt that they were respected and consulted. There appeared to be the distance between the NS teachers and the Korean faculty, which the NS teachers found comfortable rather than disturbing.
2) Disciplined but Reserved Students

While the NS teachers expressed their satisfaction with the teaching context, they displayed mixed feelings toward students in the classroom. All the NS teachers described their students as “disciplined, well-mannered, and respectful” and thus they had almost no problem in managing their classrooms. Teacher A stated that she felt she could do real teaching with Korean students (“I feel like I can really teach because it’s not about controlling students – getting them to do what you want”) and Teacher B almost felt that she could not teach other groups of students (“I just can’t imagine teaching in North America after teaching Korean students because again, they are such great students to teach”).

Although students’ disciplined and respectful attitude was considered positive, it also caused frustration to the teachers. “Students’ traditional respect” (Teacher G) was often expressed as lack of response or feedback in the classroom. The teachers in the General English Program found it particularly difficult to have students engage in activities in English. Their students found little relevance in the courses to their majors. On the other hand, the teachers in the English-related departments described their students as “motivated but reserved”; the students seemed to be interested in improving their language skills but they rarely gave feedback to the teachers. Teacher E expressed his frustration in receiving little feedback from students as follows:

(11) I can just go on and on and dribble, maybe I’m reciting something they know perfectly well, maybe they know better than I do, they will dutifully take notes. I understand that they are trying to show respect, which I appreciate. But on the other hand, I wish I knew what’s really going on. Feedback from students is really important. (Teacher E, Interview on Sept. 24, 2009)

The NS teachers tried to accept the students’ reserved participation and limited responses as a result of “natural shyness” or “face saving” (Teacher B, Teacher D, Teacher G, and Teacher H), but found it a major challenge to their efforts to create an interactive classroom where students are engaged in using the language. Facing the students’ reservation, the teachers felt the need to be more teacher-centered than they wanted to be. Another challenge for the NS teachers was students’ lack of learning strategies. Though disciplined in terms of classroom behaviors, the teachers found students not well trained in their learning behaviors. They noted that the students’ learning strategies were mostly limited to memorization and repetition. They described the students as very teacher-dependent, expecting specific teacher directions on their learning. Teacher H described students’ learning strategies as follows:
As Teacher H’s comments exemplify, the teachers commonly described the students’ approach to learning as “bottom-up” (Teacher E), which was different from the teachers’ learning experience of “trying and figuring it out.” The teachers acknowledged that students were from a different learning culture and could not easily change their learning habits just because they came to a native speaker’s class. However, the teachers tended to think that students should be more actively using and practicing English in and outside of the classroom to improve their communication ability and for that purpose, students’ learning strategies need to be expanded to include more than memorization and repetition.

The NS teachers in the study found the university setting advantageous to their career advancement in the sense that it provided opportunities and flexibility in teaching. They found the students well-disciplined in their classroom behaviors but their well-disciplined attitude did not translate well into active engagement in classroom interaction. Students’ limited participation and lack of response were found to be the main challenges for the NS teachers.

3. Teachers’ Beliefs about Active Participation

1) Language Should be Taught through Interaction

As described in the previous section, the NS teachers emphasized the need for interaction in the classroom to improve students’ language ability. Though the communicative language teaching approach can be interpreted in different ways by different teachers, the NS teachers in this study all mentioned interaction as a key feature of a communicative language classroom:

(13) I tend to focus on activities which encourage students to take some basic information and then think it through to come to their own conclusions. This is based on communicative language teaching, putting an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, learners focusing not only on the language but also on the learning process itself, using their own personal experiences. (Teacher B, Interview on Sept. 22, 2009)
As shown above, the NS teachers considered a primary goal of their teaching to be helping their students to obtain sufficient communicative competence so that they could carry out daily functions without too much difficulty. Therefore, “getting meanings across is much more important than mastering a perfect grammar” (Teacher D), and lecturing is not useful in promoting students’ interaction in the classroom. Instead, real life-related tasks were considered important (Teacher F) so that students can transfer their communication skills into real life contexts (Teacher E). For these reasons, the teachers often included supplementary activities to bring in more authentic tasks to the classroom (Teacher C, Teacher D, and Teacher H).

2) Making Mistakes is Part of Learning: Make Mistakes to Learn

Another common theme which emerged from the interviews was the NS teachers’ beliefs about making mistakes: that making mistakes is part of learning and necessary in learning a second language. Such belief appeared to be closely related to the teachers’ own learning experience. Teacher A related her teacher training experience with her views on mistakes. She described the atmosphere of the teacher training college as “don’t worry about making mistakes, you’re not going to be perfect but that’s part of learning.” Similarly, Teacher C also emphasized that “an ordinary conversation is different from a test, and making mistakes is not a big deal.” Despite the efforts of the teachers to engage students in classroom activities, they found the students afraid of making mistakes and tending toward inactivity in the classroom. Students’ avoidance of mistakes was a barrier to students’ being active and trying things out. One of the strategies to help students overcome their fear of mistakes was the teacher making mistakes him/herself. Teacher D demonstrated making mistakes in his use of Korean to reduce students’ fear of mistakes:

(14) I’m not fluent in Korean. I don’t study as much as I should. But now I’m trying to use more Korean in the classroom, just to show students that I’m also a student of language that I’m not familiar with. I notice that when I do use Korean in class, I make mistakes, I don’t let it bother me, when that does happen, I tell the students, the same goes for you. (Teacher D, Interview on Sept. 28, 2009)

The NS teachers also tried to include small group activities and one-on-one conversations with students to create an environment in which students would feel more willing to participate in classroom activities. Teacher C placed students in small groups for activities, so that they would be more relaxed about making mistakes. He stated:

(15) Because sometimes they haven’t had much experience with the native foreigners,
so I’m not sure what to expect and how difficult it would be. They might have some negative ideas about English and they might be stressed. So we try to look at the various things . . . get them to speak in small groups, talking to each other, probably not so worried about being overheard by me, making mistakes, just try to help the situations where they can talk. (Teacher C, Interview on Oct. 1, 2009)

3) Students Should be Responsible: Let Them Struggle and Enjoy Themselves

The NS teachers’ beliefs about students’ interaction and making mistakes emphasized the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. They believed that students have to be actively engaged in learning activities otherwise there may not be any real learning happening. Two particular aspects of classroom activities which encourage engagement were emphasized: let learners struggle, and encourage learners to enjoy the process. Teacher A and Teacher F emphasized learners’ readiness for learning and they believed that a certain amount of struggling in the learning process was necessary. Teacher A described her beliefs about learning in her metaphor of “gardener”:

(16) It’s the same with teaching. If you water too much, if you don’t let someone struggle, sometimes they won’t bloom. I think that’s what learner-centeredness is like, it’s letting people struggle. It’s like go for it, struggle, no problem with that. Make a mistake, there is no one doing it for you. You’ve got to do it on your own. (Teacher A, Interview on Sept. 21, 2009)

While stressing the student’s own will to stand alone or grow, Teacher A and Teacher F also emphasized the importance of teachers’ careful scaffolding so that students may not be frustrated in their struggle to figure things out. Teacher F, in this sense, described a teacher’s role as “a scaffolder”:

(17) I’m kind of saying “This is what I’m giving you, and this is kind of what I’m asking you to do it, and this is why I’m asking you to do it, but I’m not gonna tell you what it is exactly . . . I might use the metaphor of scaffolding, you know, I’ll be a framework for you, I’ll be a support for you. But ideally once the inside is built, then I get taken away. You stand on your own feet. (Teacher F, Interview on Sept. 30, 2009)

While these teachers emphasized learners’ own responsibility in learning, the other teachers emphasized the fact that learners should be able to enjoy the learning process. Teacher D described this aspect of learning as follows:
When students have some kind of emotion, they are more likely to absorb the information. So learn through play. The way it is translated into my classroom is if students are having fun, they are relaxed or content and they are more apt to do what I think they should be doing. (Teacher D, Interview on Sept 28, 2009)

Making English classes enjoyable was particularly important to those teachers who were teaching compulsory freshmen English classes. They tended to use more jokes, humorous gestures, and game-based activities to help improve students’ attitudes toward studying English. The NS teachers did not greatly differ in their perspectives on learning and agreed that learning should involve a certain amount of struggling to make sense of what students are learning and that students should find the learning process enjoyable. Both struggling and enjoyment were aspects of the learning process and the NS teachers emphasized them to differing degrees depending on their students’ levels and needs.

4) Beliefs about Teacher Roles

The teachers were asked to describe their image of a teacher or a teacher’s role as a metaphor, as metaphors can paint vivid pictures to describe the complexities of a phenomenon (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The NS teachers’ beliefs about teacher role were expressed with different images: “a gardener” (Teacher A), “a conductor” (Teacher D), “a midwife” (Teacher E), “a scaffolder” (Teacher F), “a coach” (Teacher G), and “a guide” (Teacher H). A common feature of these metaphors was their emphasis on students’ agency and on the trusting relationship between students and teachers. Teacher G described such a perspective in the following excerpt:

I don’t feel I’m teaching them anything they don’t already know. You know, I’m not really teaching language to most of our students. I’m encouraging them to go further. I’m trying to show them different ways of using what they already know and having the courage to display what they know. (Teacher G, Interview on Oct. 7, 2009)

While those metaphors reflected the NS teachers’ beliefs that learning requires students’ active participation and taking responsibility for the learning process, they also showed the teachers’ acknowledgement of the assistance they need to provide students. Considering the teachers’ perception of students’ lack of independent learning strategies and strong reliance on teachers, the NS teachers found it crucial to build rapport and maintain good relationships with students in order to challenge them to take responsibility for their own learning. In order for students to try a different way of learning, they need to be assured
that it is safe to do things differently and thus one of the primary functions identified by the teachers was to build a trusting relationship with students and create safe learning environments.

The metaphors for teachers’ roles exhibited a common theme of the teacher being “a facilitator.” That is, the NS teachers assumed roles as supporting staff for the main actors on the stage. Such metaphors reflect beliefs about learning and learners— that learners should be responsible for the learning process, and learners should be the main actors in the process, not the teachers. Thus teachers were often depicted as people who provide necessary information and help for students to build confidence and enjoy the learning process. The teachers’ metaphors provided useful insight into their personal interpretation of what they believed about learning and teaching since they reflect their personal philosophies—ones which they have developed through expectations in different situations.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering the scarcity of research on NS teachers in the Korean university setting, the present study investigated native speaker teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching. The findings showed that the NS teachers believed that learners’ active participation is a core part of language learning. The teachers believed learners’ active participation in classroom interaction, making mistakes, and taking responsibility for their own learning were core elements of second language learning. Such beliefs were closely related to the teachers’ own learning experiences gained in their home contexts, and their theoretical or practical knowledge acquired through their teacher training or prior teaching experiences. The results reaffirm the claim that teachers’ personal experience in learning can be a dominating force in teachers’ practices in the classrooms.

The NS teachers observed that Korean learners were well-disciplined and respectful to their teachers and yet they lacked confidence in their ability to speak English and failed to use learning strategies in the English learning process. Therefore, the teachers believed that an important part of their role as teachers is to assist learners to stand on their own by helping learners struggle with learning while encouraging students to enjoy the learning process. The findings indicate that the classroom can be seen as a place where different learning experiences and expectations meet and contradict each other, which can be illustrated in the following figure:
Figure 1 illustrates that the classroom is a place in which two different learning cultures may be contesting. It points out that the introduction of NS teachers brings to the classroom not just the different medium of classroom communication but also a different learning culture, which may not be congruent with students’ previous learning experiences. In order to implement the teachers’ beliefs about language teaching without causing much tension or conflict in the classroom, the NS teachers found establishing and maintaining a good rapport with the students was crucial. A trusting relationship can create a safe feeling for students and this can help the learners try what they are not accustomed to. Thus a positive teacher-student relationship was seen as a necessary precondition to narrowing the gap in different learning cultures and experiences in the classroom.

Despite much interest in learner beliefs about language learning, it has not been adequately discussed what beliefs teachers bring into their classrooms, what beliefs are accepted, and what beliefs are modified in the language classroom. With recent interest in teachers’ own personal knowledge and theory, it has become important to consider teachers beliefs and values as they serve as the background for much of the decision making and actions in the classroom (Johnson & Golombeck, 2002). As teachers’ beliefs may have a dominant influence on students, it is important for teachers to be aware of their own beliefs about learning and teaching and how they are translated into classroom practices. Only then can gaps and discrepancies between the teacher and students be recognized and resolved to benefit both parties. In this regard, the study noted the importance of teachers’ conscious recognition of students’ beliefs and learning experiences different from their own and awareness of incongruence in expectations in the classroom. Teachers’ strong convictions based upon their theoretical knowledge of second language learning and teaching and personal experience maybe imposed on students without proper consideration of students’ prior learning experiences. It is often forgotten that no matter how widely accepted a theoretical approach is, a new approach to learning and teaching
cannot be implemented without proper adaptation to the local culture. The NS teachers in the present study faced the challenge of lack of response and reserved participation in the classroom and had to recognize the need to provide more guidance or scaffolding to the learners as part of the learning process. As a result, they foster a friendly learning atmosphere in order to encourage learners to take the risk of being active in the learning process. However, such negotiation does not mean that the teachers’ beliefs have greatly changed. While the study confirms the results in Peacock (2001) in that teachers’ beliefs do not readily change, it also shows that teachers’ beliefs may adapt to accommodate the contextual factors as suggested in Mattheousdakis (2007) and Gu (2010).

Teachers’ beliefs about learners being active participants are the essence of the communicative language teaching approach. In this study, active participation was encouraged by the teachers through group work and real life-based tasks in the classroom. However, it is not certain how much effect this had in terms of learning actions that individual learners took outside the classroom. Whether learners’ experience of participation in the classroom and its positive outcomes would have an enduring effect on their agency remains as an open question.

The findings of the study have implications for teacher education, specifically with regard to teacher cognition. Second language teachers need to be further encouraged to review their beliefs and knowledge and to take into consideration of contextual realities. Theories and educational approaches the teachers acquire in the process of their teacher training should be reconsidered and reconstructed to accommodate the needs of the local teaching culture, which is part of true teaching expertise as suggested in Tsui (2003). The results also indicate the need that teacher education has to direct its attention to individual teachers’ learning backgrounds, beliefs about learning and teaching on which the teacher’s knowledge and cognition are based. This point addresses the discussion of reflective teacher education. Whereas teacher education formerly focused on knowledge transmission without regarding the teacher’s own standing, current theories of teacher education recognize the importance of teachers’ cognition, knowledge, and personal theory (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). They stress that teachers should be agents of their own personal theory instead of blindly following what theories suggest. Teachers’ awareness of their own beliefs and knowledge can lead toward improving teaching practices. This is particularly important in contexts where the teachers do not share a similar learning and teaching culture with their students, and therefore have to develop their own teaching practices without abandoning their beliefs about learning and teaching.

Considering the scarcity of research on NS teachers in the EFL setting, this study suggests a possible direction of future research in teacher education – an investigation of the NS teachers’ personal and contextual factors that may shape and modify teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching. It also provides valuable insights into
the classroom in an EFL context in which the teacher and the students do not share similar learning experiences.

This study, however, has methodological limitations. As the participants were familiar with the researcher, the preexisting relationships between the researcher and the participants may have influenced the interview process. The researcher was on the recruiting committee when the participating teachers were hired at the current university. Although the researcher no longer held the position at the time of the study and the relationship with those teachers had been always friendly, it cannot be completely dismissed that these teachers may have answered the questions to please the researcher. The other weakness of the study lies in its data collection process. Grounded theory recommends that a researcher be constantly engaged in data collection and data analysis procedures to reach a saturation point (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data saturation requires more data collection in tandem with the data analysis process. The study was limited to only eight teachers and did not include more participants. Though generalizability is not the purpose of this qualitative study, a bigger number of similar or different participants for a longer period could ensure more transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, considering the scarcity of qualitative research on teacher beliefs and limited variety of qualitative methods in teacher education in general (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000), the current study may contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of teachers’ cognition and their practices through a qualitative lens.

While some studies investigated the differences between teachers’ stated beliefs and observed practices (Feryok, 2008; Polat, 2010), this study did not include observed practices through classroom observation. Thus the question of whether the teachers’ stated beliefs reflect their actual teaching practices needs to be further investigated. In addition, the student’s learning behavior and culture was only described from the teachers’ perspective and students’ beliefs about learning and perspectives on classroom procedures need to be included in order to have a more complete understanding of the two different cultures in the classroom and to promote consistency between teacher beliefs and instructional practices.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Interview questions

1. What motivated you to become a teacher?
2. Can you describe your learning experience? What did you like or dislike?
3. Can you describe your second language learning experience? What were the positive or negative aspects of it?
4. Do you have anyone who has a strong influence on your learning/teaching?
5. Can you tell me about your teaching experience?
6. What motivated you to teach in Korea?
7. What did you find similar to and different from your previous teaching experience?
8. What is your definition of CLT? How do you apply CLT in your classroom?
9. Do you have any conflict between what you want to do and what you can actually do in the classroom?
10. How would you describe yourself as a teacher? How would you describe a teacher role?

A story: Active participation as a core category

(Boldfaced parts indicate categories found at the axial coding stage)

Native teachers believe that students’ active participation is the key features of successful in learning English in a Korean university setting. Their belief about students’ active participation is based on their own experience of learning, which was greatly influenced by their former teachers. To the native teachers, being an active learner means that learners should struggle (scaffolded struggle) and yet they enjoy the process. That is, learning involves struggle, and yet it is fun. Their belief, however, was met with students’ reserved attitude in the classroom. They do not express their opinion, do not raise questions, or interact with the teacher or their peers. Though they are disciplined, the native teachers found this a challenge to improving communication ability. The native teachers considered themselves as an assisting staff, not as a main actor in the learning process. As a way to promote students’ active participation, the teachers negotiated their approach to teaching. They tried to create and maintain a good relationship with students by providing positive experience in the classroom. In addition, they modified their strictly student-centered lesson to accommodate students’ needs for more teacher-centered instruction.
Applicable levels: tertiary
Key words: native speaker teachers, teacher beliefs, participation, mistakes, teacher role

Kim, Shinhye
Dept. of English Education
Keimyung University
2800 Dalgubeol-daero
Daegu 704-701, Korea
Tel: (053) 580-5125
Fax: (053) 580-6025
E-mail: shinhye6@kmu.ac.kr

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