Teacher Thoughts Behind Instructional Decision-Making

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This study investigated the thoughts behind elementary school teachers’ instructional decision-making for English lessons. Twelve elementary school teachers were interviewed for a description of their English classes in terms of their planning for class work and actual teaching of their classes. The transcription of recorded interviews was analyzed for the thoughts, categories of the thoughts, and underlying themes of the thoughts influencing the teachers’ instructional decision-making. The analysis found three themes underlying the thoughts. The themes are as follows: 1) teaching orientation, 2) management orientation, and 3) individualized interpretation of the curriculum. The results show that the twelve teachers’ decision-making process for their classes was significantly influenced by thoughts which could interfere with the successful implementation of communicative English teaching in elementary classrooms. Finally, the study suggests the need for more in-depth qualitative research into this issue.

I. INTRODUCTION

Korean elementary English education started with hopes of producing a new generation of English users who could truly use the language in communicative situations. As a result, it has seen a new group of young English learners who are more comfortable with spoken English than the previous generations of English learners (Lee, Choi, Boo & Lee, 2001). However, it is not the understanding of the educators and researchers involved in elementary English education that in general these learners can carry out everyday conversation necessary to communicate with foreigners in the language (Kim, Suh & Park, 2000). This can be attributed to the insufficient amount of input given to the learner partially because of the lack of a properly trained teaching force as some scholars pointed out at the onset of the elementary English program (Crookes, 1997).
In recent years, there has been an influx of teachers into the elementary English program who are more specialized in English teaching than the previous groups of teachers. The elementary English classroom scenes are changing by these teachers, and these teachers are managing their classes under the constraints of oversized classes, relatively short class hours established by the curriculum, and other fixed limitations. Since the language learning/teaching environment is not near ideal, teachers' creative interpretation of the curriculum is a necessity. Consequently, how the teachers manage to teach their English classes is a matter of utmost interest, and their teaching behavior can be the target of watchful observation. These overall teaching behaviors have received widespread attention recently as a part of the trend viewing teaching as a cognitive process (Freeman & Richards, 1993). The concepts such as teacher knowledge, teacher belief, and teacher cognition (Clandinin, 1984; Woods, 1996) are taken as fundamental aspects of teaching which explain what teachers do and how they decide what to do with their class.

In the field of second language acquisition, researchers have probed the same constructs highlighting teachers' reflection on their teaching behavior (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Reflective teaching (i.e., teachers looking back on their teaching, analyzing their instructional thoughts and behaviors, and improving their teaching) has been advocated for teachers' professional development and classroom improvement. Along with this emphasis on the role of teacher thinking, other cognitive aspects involved in teaching have been actively applied to second language teachers in an effort to understand teaching better and to provide for an improved learning/teaching environment. Studies focusing on teacher thoughts and behaviors in second language classrooms (Freeman, 1989; Freeman & Richards, 1993, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Tedick & Walker, 1994, 1995; Woods, 1996) support the concept of the teacher being a professional who actively makes instructional decisions based on complex factors. This decision-making is revealed through the teacher's individual interpretation and reconstruction of teaching materials and methods and even the curricular guidelines. The overall instructional decision-making is reported to be mainly on a personal level, influenced by the teachers' individually held beliefs about teaching and learning, and by their understanding of instructional contexts (Burns, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Moran, 1996; Smith, 1996; Woods, 1996). In other words, classroom language teachers are perceived as translating curriculums through their own decision-making on the basis of factors such as their personal and professional knowledge, their students, their institution, the social milieu, and more.

Understanding teachers' decision-making process can provide a close look into the classroom and the teacher in practice. It, in return, can offer a forward direction for more advanced and more effective teaching practice. Therefore, this study aims at investigating Korean elementary
school teachers’ instructional decision-making for English classes. Why the teachers make the decisions they make and what the thoughts behind their teaching decisions and behaviors are investigated. Through the exploration of elementary school teachers’ thoughts behind their decision-making, this study intends to discover a mechanism contributing to the construction of Korean elementary English classrooms. For this purpose, twelve elementary school teachers were asked to describe their English classes with the English textbook as the guide.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature dealing with teacher cognition, teaching is often discussed in terms of teacher knowledge and instructional decision-making based on the knowledge. The ability to make proper decisions suiting the class at hand is considered as an indispensable skill of a teacher, and the complex array of teacher knowledge is believed to be a main constituent of the ability (Shulman, 1987).

The general tacit knowledge teachers apply in their instructional decision-making is variously termed by different researchers (Clandinin, 1985; Gatbonton, 1999; Golombek, 1998; Preece, 1994). Using a term, ‘image,’ Clandinin (1984) describes the teacher’s knowledge as neither theoretical (related to theories of learning, teaching, and curriculums) nor personal (related to knowing the student), but as two kinds of knowledge merged and interpreted through the teacher’s personal and situational backgrounds. The term ‘image’ representing a teacher’s “personal practical knowledge” (p. 361) is described as the teacher’s leading philosophy in planning lessons, putting them into action, and evaluating the result.

Preece (1994) stressed this ‘personal’ side of teacher knowledge in his study on the effect of balanced teacher knowledge. In the study a group of teacher trainees were given intense lessons on general pedagogical knowledge—a ‘teacher should’ list of direct academic instruction, time-on-task, practice until mastery, and whole class teaching developed from teacher behavior research. In subsequent teaching practice, the trainees revealed a tendency to adhere to academic achievement orientation. At the same time, the trainees’ teaching was found to be having a negative effect on the student–teacher relationship and student attitude. Preece warns about the danger of ‘knowing that’ (teaching principles) without ‘knowing how’ and advises to apply the principles with personal consideration of one’s students and teaching context.

The ideal blend of ‘knowing that’ (general pedagogical knowledge) and content knowledge is what Shulman (1987) asserts as an essential quality every teacher should have. Shulman suggested a categorical list of pedagogical knowledge necessary in teaching. The categories include content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge,
pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational context, and knowledge of educational ends. Among the categories, Shulman pinpoints the pedagogical content knowledge as a category of special importance. He describes it as an amalgamation of content and pedagogical knowledge in consideration of the effective presentation of the content to the learner. Shulman contends that lack of this pedagogical content knowledge would invalidate any flexible and interactive teaching techniques a teacher would have built.

Gatbonton (1999) investigated teacher knowledge applied in the actual teaching scene. Using an analysis of verbal protocols of seven ESL teachers’ thought process, she discovered that 200 and some instructional thoughts occurred per hour of teaching time. Among many thought categories, twenty were found to occur commonly in the teachers. The most predominantly occurred thought categories were thoughts concerning language input to the students and language output by the students. Gatbonton pointed out that the thought categories, which were identified, reflected “many of the pedagogical points stressed” (p. 45) in teacher education. Gatbonton speculated about the positive effect teacher education could have on teachers’ accumulated working knowledge.

Similar dynamics of how language teachers think and act while teaching were probed with pre-service ESL teachers. Johnson (1992) analyzed eight pre-service ESL teachers’ recall comments on their instructional decision-making, which were collected from viewing their recorded teaching. The results showed that these teachers’ instructional actions were influenced by unexpected student responses and the desire to sustain the flow of instructional activities. The pre-service teachers’ instructional decisions were found to be based on the need to assure students’ motivation, involvement, and understanding, and the need to sustain control over instructional management.

How the demands of a classroom situation dictate teachers’ decisions and actions and, in due course, activate teachers’ knowledge are investigated by Golombek (1998). Through observations of two in-service ESL teachers’ classes and their narrative about their practice, the researcher portrayed how the two teachers reflected on their experience as learners and teachers (i.e., how they relied on personal practical knowledge to interpret the classroom situation). The teachers were described as employing their personal practical knowledge as an interpretive filter to make sense of the issues and tensions in the classroom. They were reported again as using the knowledge to respond to the pedagogical crisis, which occurred in the teaching situation. The personal practical knowledge was understood as being reshaped simultaneously through the very process.

Studies examining teacher knowledge and the result of its application in the language classroom report complex working of the knowledge behind the decisions teachers make. Burns (1996) documented how a teacher’s knowledge gained in a unique classroom situation worked
as a guiding concept in instructional decision-making and ensued the development of alternative modes of instruction. A teacher who was teaching a group of beginning language learners interpreted her learners' needs in the background of their language level and everyday lives. Based on this knowledge of the classroom and her pedagogical knowledge, the teacher created alternative classroom interaction patterns. The model interaction patterns were custom-tailored for her students and not part of any existing instructional methods in the practice theories. Employing a novel approach of including learners' personal lives and their first language in the manner of group talk without obvious teacher control, the new instructional method was created. Further, it was found to be successful with her learners. This alternative instructional practice was considered based on "personalized theories for practice" (p. 175) and as distinct from the established theories of practice. These personalized theories, Burns claims, should not be considered as supplementary or secondary to the mainstream teaching theories, but as "the motivating conceptual frameworks shaping what teachers do when they teach" (p. 175).

The mental framework teachers use to interpret and reconstruct their instructional perception and practice has been explored as a list of personal principles. From class observations and conversations with classroom teachers, Richards (1996) worked out a list of teachers' knowledge in teaching. This knowledge, stated in the form of maxims, reflects teachers' cultural background, belief systems, experience, and training. Richards' list of teachers' maxims provides a summarizing conclusion on the literature of teacher knowledge: teacher knowledge is complex, and this complex knowledge informs teachers in their decision-making on teaching.

III. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method of interviewing for the exploration of teachers' thoughts behind their instructional decision-making. To elicit the thoughts, twelve elementary school teachers were interviewed and requested to describe their English class. Aiming at thick description (Geertz, 1973) coming from the teachers' perspectives, each interview was conducted as an "unstructured interview" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 269) in an "mutually-sharing" (p. 269) atmosphere where the interviewee and the researcher shared the same interests as colleagues in elementary English education. The interview did not use preset interview questions or description areas. Other than the opening request for a detailed description of their classes, the occasional questions asked rose mainly from the situation. Following the data collection tenet that "[articulation] in the context of a 'story' about concrete events, behaviors and plans is more likely to be grounded in actual behavior" (Woods, 1996, p. 27) and narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002), this study had the subject teachers tell stories of their
classes.

At the same time, the study followed the principles of natural inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in collection and analysis of the data and attempted to search for universal properties displayed in each individual case (Erickson, 1986) provided by the twelve teachers’ in-depth description of their classes.

1. Subjects

The subjects interviewed for this study consisted of elementary school teachers who were, at the time of the interviews, enrolled in programs at different graduate schools of education and their colleagues at work. On condition that they were presently teaching English in elementary school at the time of the interview, the teachers joined the study on a voluntary basis. The teachers’ background presented in Table 1 shows the diversity of the subjects of the study in their education, teaching experience, and teaching status.

All the teachers were teaching at schools in Seoul and its vicinity, and the areas of the schools were mainly middle- and lower-middle class neighborhoods with the exception of one private school.

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EB: Educational background; TS: Teacher status; TE: Teaching experience; EE: English teaching experience; ce: College of Education; cee: College of Elementary Education; o: Other colleges; emp: Enrolled in MA program; ma: MA degree holder; t: Temporary English teaching assignment; r: Regular classroom teacher; i: Instructor; Teaching experience in years

2. Data Collection

The interviews were conducted through twelve individual sessions between the researcher and each subject teacher. Ten interviews were conducted during June and July of 2002 and two interviews were added in October of the same year (See Table 2 for specific dates). At the interview each teacher was requested to describe the English classes they taught most recently. To assist this retrospective account of the classes, the textbook was used as a frame of reference.
In order to limit the time for the interview, two lessons of the textbook, spread over eight class periods approximately, were suggested for description. For easier recall, the two lessons most recently taught were suggested; however, some teachers’ recalls were not exactly based on this suggestion, but these were nevertheless accepted. Once they decided on the two lessons to describe, the teachers were asked to describe the work they did while teaching the lessons. The typical opening question was, “Go ahead and tell me what you did while teaching these lessons. Please describe the work in detail, and if you substituted some part of the lessons with other activities, you can talk about that, too.” Following that request, the teachers described what they did with how’s and why’s while going through the textbook and the teacher’s manual according to their own preference of details, styles, and tones.

The teachers were not informed of the specific focus of the study. The purpose of this teacher narrative was to elicit underlying thoughts for each instructional decision in the form of stories, not in generalized statements of reasons. To prevent the teachers from offering abstract statements of their rationales for classroom behaviors, which might be what they would like to show in the interview context (Woods, 1996), only the general purpose of the research (i.e., investigating how teachers teach their classes) was provided. Except the two teachers who described only one lesson due to scheduling difficulties, all the teachers talked about two lessons. As shown in Table 2, the longest interview took approximately 90 minutes, and the shortest 50 minutes. The interviews were audio taped, and all twelve interviews produced approximately 780 minutes of recording.

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All the dates are in year 2002.; Lengths are in minutes.

3. Analysis

The recorded data were played and a non-verbatim transcript was made. In contrast to the verbatim transcription, this transcription did not include all the words spoken, but included a detailed summary of what the teachers said including the major content words used and their conveying tones. With this transcript as the primary data, multiple readings of the data were undertaken.

Through the first set of multiple readings, notes on each teacher’s tendency in decision-making were made. At the same time, the overall understanding of the teachers’ teaching
behavior was formed. From this process surfaced the first preliminary categories of teacher thoughts influencing their decision-making. The categories were students-induced and teacher-induced.

With the notes and the categories as guides, the second set of multiple readings was conducted. Through these readings, distinguishing actions of decision-making and their generating thoughts were highlighted on the transcript. From this process, more preliminary categories for the teachers’ thoughts behind instructional decisions emerged. These preliminary categories included student, teacher, content, teaching methods, and environment. More categories surfaced, and some were eliminated. The remaining categories were, at the same time, reshuffled through the second set of readings. The categories of the teachers’ thoughts were finalized at this level of reading. They were as follows: content, organization, student, teacher, environment, and curriculum objectives.

In the third set of readings, the teachers’ thoughts, which had been identified and highlighted on the transcript, were marked with the category names of the six established categories. The thoughts marked with the category names were copied under each category heading and made into a category directory with the transcript page numbers indicated.

Through the final readings of the directory and the transcript, themes underlying the teachers’ thoughts influencing their decision-making emerged. They were teaching orientation, management orientation, and individualized interpretation of the curriculum.

IV. DISCUSSION

1. Teaching Orientation

The teachers’ thoughts slanting to teaching (i.e., giving information about English more than having students learn) was revealed in many instances of decision-making for different areas of class work. While the revelation of the tendency was more straightforward in the statements and actions of the 5th and 6th grade teachers (upper grade teachers), with the lower grade teachers, it was indirect through their handling of class activities.

1) Upper Grade Teachers

Citing lack of time as a reason, many teachers either dismissed the games or activities suggested by the textbook or used the ones that were simple to do. On the other hand, they concentrated on the main sentence pattern instruction. As one teacher explained, teaching
students main sentence patterns and doing any game in one class period seemed a challenge because of time restraints. In addition, this same teacher was spending a relatively long period of time teaching the patterns through repetitive listening drills. Her thoughts behind such classroom practice were revealed in the following response:

I am worried that they are not able to hear the patterns, so we spend a lot of time repeating the listening part. Then we move on to reading [from the monitor] the dialogue, and I explain and ask them questions to check their comprehension. By then we have usually about 10 minutes or less left. We can do a game, or we don’t depending on the lesson. (Teacher S6)

Time, however, did not seem to be the main reason for her decision to leave out games from the lesson. The teacher was concerned about teaching the students the language patterns, making sure that they received what they were supposed to learn. Moreover, conforming to the elementary English curriculum, which stipulates that English be taught mainly through oral practice, Teacher S6 spoke mostly in English at the beginning section of each class where the main sentence patterns were introduced and practiced. This fact was one of the contributing reasons for this comprehension through listening task taking a significant amount of time. When the teacher felt that the basic job of teaching the patterns was done and her students understood the point of the lesson, the class period would have been almost over. The students were given fairly little time to do activities using the patterns learned shortly before. The teacher mentioned that she sometimes would stay longer, borrowing what little time she could from the 15-minute break to finish a game that was started, as if she were “teaching to death” (Teacher S6). Cutting down her own ‘teaching’ somewhat and having the students ‘use’ the patterns in a game-like activity to make learning complete did not seem to occur to her ‘teaching’ mind.

This reasoning that “they need to know first what they need to know, then they can do something with it” seemed to prevail among the teachers regardless of the grade level they were teaching. Teacher M6 further explains this in her logical steps in learning English:

To play the games, they need to know the words to be used. We work hard on the words, and often we do not have time left to play the games. (Teacher M6)

The teacher was expressing her thoughts that at least the students needed to be taught what they needed to know (i.e., the words, even without the games to use the words in), then they would know what they were taught. A similar understanding at a different angle is seen in the following response:
Elementary students need to be exposed to various patterns and functions. So, I do not want to spend a long time during the lesson doing games and all. Rather, I skip a lot here and there, and try to have them see and taste all the English stuff in the textbook. (Teacher K5)

Since lack of time was always the issue, the teacher made a choice of making her students know about the patterns, rather than having them try the patterns in language activities.

In addition, most of the 6th grade teachers openly expressed the idea that 6th graders needed to be explicitly taught English. Teacher Y6 spent a good time making sure her students verbalized the main sentence patterns the right way and then memorized the important vocabulary words and sentence patterns. The thought behind this action was her belief that unless she forced her students to learn step by step from the vocabulary level to pronunciation and from sentence pattern memorization to sentence writing, they would not learn much. At the beginning of a lesson which would stretch into four class sessions over a two-week period, this teacher would prepare a word list which would include the main vocabulary and sentence patterns. She would have this list printed on a slip and give it to the students to work on during the two weeks to prepare for a quiz in the last class of the lesson. Her students followed her lead and seemed to be doing relatively well. The teacher was firm in her belief that having 6th grade English mainly for communicative competence was not working, and the students needed to be pushed to memorize and learn some English.

Since Teacher Y6 spent a large chunk of time studying words and sentence patterns, she had little time left for other things. She skipped most of the reviews and crammed game-like activities suggested in the textbook into the short time that remained. She omitted most of “Let’s Play,” the game-like activities suggested in the textbook. Instead, the teacher tried some familiar games, which needed less time for preparation and explanation. Teacher Y6’s emphasis on memorizing the vocabulary and sentence patterns was influenced by her thoughts that 6th graders need to know as much English as possible to get ready for middle school where the students must deal with grammar drills drawn from the massive amount of written English to which they are exposed. Most of the 6th grade teachers in this group contended that teaching (explaining) grammar and having students copy written words and sentences were all necessary. They argued that considering the middle school English curriculum, “having them relax through the communicative competence approach [was] all too very ideal” (Teacher Y6), and although speaking is important, according to Teacher H6, vocabulary should be regarded as essential and be memorized through drills and tests.
2) Lower Grade Teachers

Unlike the upper grade teachers, the teachers teaching 3rd and 4th graders did not verbalize their notions of teaching eagerly. At the same time, due to the relative easiness of the material for the lower grades, most of the teachers were not in a hurry to teach much in a limited time. As a result, the teachers were taking time leading the students through oral pattern drills. More evident in these teachers’ thoughts was the notion that the students needed to be able to verbally practice the patterns and know them. They collectively described the patterns as simple and repetitive throughout each lesson, so they did not need to explain much to their students. Their students, therefore, needed only to memorize the patterns through oral practice. These thoughts formed the basis of having students complete class work consisting of many repetitions in various pair and group reciting. A comment from Teacher S4 explains this line of thinking:

This one has a story. The clock is broken, and the kid is late for school. It seems like an interesting situation. But while doing this pattern repetition, they get bored. It’s pretty much just a repetition of “What time is it?” Anyway, the pattern is simple, and they do this o.k. […] We practice the pattern between me and the class using a paper clock, or within individual groups, the students ask, “What time is it?” And one group answers, “It’s 9 o’clock.” We still have time left, and we do another set of intra-group and inter-group practice. (Teacher S4)

Teacher S4 considered the patterns too simple for the 4th grader’s mentality, even though their English was not good enough to use the patterns in conversation. Most of her students did not have a problem doing the pattern drill. As a result, she had some time left in her class and needed more activities. Teacher S4 brought in many songs from other sources, for she “needed to fill in the time, and the students [seemed] to like singing.” The teacher did not seem to consider the possibility of extending the simple pattern drill into something more personal and communicative. This position of not seeing beyond the teaching of language patterns can be seen in the way some of the teachers dealt with the role-play section in the textbook, which provided a brief dramatized dialogue with scenes:

First, I had the class watch the Role Play [of the Town Mouse, Country Mouse story] from the CD. Then I divided the class into boys and girls and had them each repeat the country mouse and town mouse lines. The lines were fairly simple, just “Hello, Hello, What’s this? It’s a cake.” and “I’m sorry. It’s O.K.” The students watched the scenes twice all together and recited the lines between the boys and girls. Then they switched roles and
did one more reciting. After that, it was over and done. (Teacher S3)

Teacher S3, in the same way as Teacher S4, regarded the 3rd grade English curriculum as being simple and easy to manage. She commented that despite her “not-so-good English,” teaching English was manageable. Conducting her classes mainly by the principle of doing oral pattern practice of each main sentence pattern seemed simple to her. Like Teacher S4, Teacher S3 was managing her class without much time pressure. Similarly, Teacher S3 did not seem to explore the possibility of extending the sentence pattern practice into somewhat communicative activities. As a result, activities such as role-playing were handled as if they were another kind of sentence pattern teaching and repetition drill.

The thoughts behind such class work decision-making of not extending pattern work into more communicative activities can be observed in the following comment: “Even with a strict activity structure of deciding the objects to talk about and what to say in questions and answers, the students keep asking questions about the procedure when they actually do it on their own” (Teacher S3). This thought seemed to prevail among the lower grade teachers, and they ran their classes basically with that understanding. Accordingly, Teacher H3’s game-like activities were strictly structured extensions of the main pattern drill. The tight structuring was necessary because “without telling them what to say, the students could not do the activity” (Teacher H3). Teacher J4 was in the same situation. She was into teaching the patterns and checking individual students’ verbalization of the patterns. Her classes seemed more like upper grade classes, and naturally, she was constrained by time in her decision-making on work activities other than the pattern work.

The issue of what comes first in second language learning—knowing about the language or using the language—can be debated. However, in general, scholars agree that knowing about the language does not guarantee the ability to use it. Judging from this argument, it appears that this group of elementary teachers was doing too much teaching and fairly little amount of letting their students use the language to complete their learning. Because the teachers thought instilling the language was first and foundational, they tried to instill the usage of the language into the students, so that the students could use the knowledge later. The teachers, however, did not seem to pay attention to the mechanism involved in language learning, which is usage without actual use is not retained very long in the learner.

2. Management Orientation

The second theme underlying the teachers’ thoughts influencing their decision-making for classroom activities can be identified as their management concerns. Leading about 40
youngsters through each 40-minute session successfully might have been one of the greatest concerns for the teachers.

1) Upper Grade Teachers

One aspect of decision-making in teaching influenced by management orientation was the teachers’ use of English in the classroom. Most of the teachers stressed that they would not follow the curriculum suggestion of conducting classes in English. As much as conceding that their English was not quite advanced, the teachers reasoned that when the majority of the students were not able to understand spoken English, conducting class only in English would simply lead to the students becoming inattentive to the work and a noisy classroom. Teacher H6 described that she would start each English class by speaking mostly English. Then, soon enough, she would have to switch to Korean because, otherwise, she would lose her students’ attention, and the class would no longer be manageable. Teacher W6, who claimed her private school students were more advanced, was in the same dilemma. She stated that she could not think of speaking anything but Korean in high tones for control purposes. Since she needed to keep the noise level down to have the work proceed, she maintained, she had to surrender the idea of providing English input through her speaking the language. Teacher S6 was one exception in this tendency. She acknowledged that her conducting the main pattern drill mostly in English took up a large chunk of class time, and as a result, she had to be very skillful in managing other work to finish her syllabus.

Other areas where the teachers’ decisions were heavily based on management concerns were their choices of games to use and ways to put them into action. The teachers did not mechanically choose the games and activities or merely follow the teacher’s manual’s suggestions. They chose specific games or activities that could fit into their criterion of manageability, and they restructured the suggested games to suit their purposes. When deciding which game to play, they picked the familiar ones and those with simple directions. The teachers contended that the students, without tight control, would feel lost or feel too relaxed and roam around the room making unnecessary noises without practicing. To prevent that from happening, the teachers preferred games requiring minimal physical movement. In addition, the teachers directed the students with strictly structured procedures of the games including which words to say and had the students follow them. Teacher Y6 showed her dislike of activities requiring students to move around, especially movements of groups of students to the front of the classroom with the rest watching as an audience. She reasoned that activities with such movements would use too much time, while the students who would be watching would not pay attention but chat on their own resulting in an unbearably noisy and unmanageable class.
The tight control of activity procedures can be seen in Teacher S6’s activity plans. For her 6th graders, the teacher would write on the board words to use in the activity during the activity explanation time. For the lesson concerning talking about jobs, the sentences to say were as follows: “Hi. Is this your mother? (looking at a prepared picture); Does your mother work?; What does she do?” The teacher asserted that this kind of step-by-step guidance was essential to have her students move around and do the activity effectively. She added that for some of her students who would otherwise go around idly and just watch others, such structure was indispensable if they would do the activity.

Teacher Y6 showed similar discontentment to a management dilemma due to unnecessary delay and resulting time loss in the wrapping up phase after each activity:

I conclude the activity myself. If I let the kids do it one by one in their group, they wouldn’t do it. If one hesitates, this has a bad influence on others. They all try not to report, and they often hesitate. It’s like an epidemic running through the classroom, and I cannot endure such loss of time and delay. (Teacher Y6)

The same position of not wanting management complications surfaced in the way Teacher K5 dealt with her review activity:

In reviewing the lesson on “Talk about your daily routine with a partner,” I ask my students, “How do you say, ‘몇 시에 일어나니?’ [What time do you get up?]” They answer, “What time do you get up?” They can do that much. Then I continue, “How do you say, ‘일곱 시에 일어난다?’ [I get up at seven o’clock.]?” They say, “I get up at seven.” Then I tell them to do the same with their partners. If I just tell them to talk about their daily routines, they could never do that. I have to put things into specific questions and answers to use. Then they can do it. It’s better than nothing. (Teacher K5)

The teacher did not want the reviews to cause commotion in the class, but wanted them to be finished neatly on time without much variation.

Management worries prevented some teachers from trying certain activities suggested in the textbook. To Teacher Y5’s understanding, role-playing was something more complicated than other class work and was an activity that she would not be able to manage without many complications. Since she interpreted role-playing as only real communicative work by students, she was not sure if she could handle the preparation and the actual management of the activity. For this reason, her class had never done the “Role Play” section of the textbook.

In the issue of class work management, Teacher K6 cannot be left out. The teacher’s main
goal for English class was to have her students memorize the main dialogue patterns. She believed that once the students knew the phrases by heart, other activities would run without much difficulty. The students were put into memorization practice mainly in pairs, and the teacher checked the individual performances. Songs were given as homework to practice so that they could sing together without losing time practicing them in class. Once memorization process was done, the teacher would be flexible leading her class through games or other activities. Since pattern memorization and checking would take up significant class time, games and activities were the ones often skipped or shortened. Difficult open-ended items in the reviews were either omitted or changed. At the end of each lesson, the teacher gave a written test on the memorized sentence patterns. This completed the lesson. The teacher mentioned that some of her students read from memory when they did the activities involving some reading. The teacher seemed to accept it as the reality of elementary English and was satisfied with this. She did not discuss any plans to try extra work from the wishful thinking of providing a more communicative environment in her classroom since she seemed convinced that she would not be able to manage such activities well.

2) Lower Grade Teachers

The lower grade teachers seemed to be in more control of their classes due to the docile nature of the younger students and the relative simplicity of the work. However, the newness of the subject and the students’ underdeveloped mental agility seemed to restrain these teachers in their classroom management compared with the upper grade teachers.

Teacher S3 talked about her thoughts behind decision-making on games to do, and in so doing, she showed how management concerns were often on her mind:

I just choose any game from the “Let’s Play” section. If you look at this illustration [from “Let’s Play” in the textbook], the students need to sit in a circle. [So, I did not choose it.] What I did choose looked interesting to my students without needing too much of my effort to prepare for it. This one [in the textbook] requires students to move, and it’s cumbersome. I don’t think too much about the educational consequences and things like that. Needing to seat the students in a special way and to prepare things for the game made me not use this game [in the textbook]. (Teacher S3)

Even though the teacher mentioned that she would just choose any “Let’s Play” game, she was opting for games that did not complicate her preparation for class and making decisions on an activity which would be manageable and work smoothly.
Most of the 3rd and 4th grade work seemed not very complicated for the students to handle. As a result, the teachers seemed, most of the time, to rely on the comfort of easy management of the usual work. However, on occasion, the teachers attempted activities slightly more complex than the usual. The teachers' effort to manage the activity through tight structuring was unmistakable. Teacher H3 narrated how she would try to manage her class on such an occasion:

[When we do the activity for exchanging birthday presents] I teach them what to say for the activity [of going around giving and getting make-believe presents]. I tell them, "Greetings, first. Then, you have learned, 'Sit down, please', so use it. Then, you thank your partner. What do you say? Next, 'Happy birthday.' 'This is for you.' 'Thank you.' Without this specific instruction of what to say, they cannot do the activity. (Teacher H3)

As her way of instilling in the students the ABC's of how to do the activity, the teacher would create a moment of absolute attention from the students and tell them one phrase after another so that the students would not forget the sentences. The third graders might not have said all of what the teacher ordered at the onset of the activity; however, the students did go around and said the necessary words during the activity. This teacher, who seemed to follow her own manual of English class more often than the textbook or the teacher's manual, was meticulously managing her class. With the purpose of having group work proceed efficiently and completely, she had assigned a leader for each group to take the responsibility of leading the group work and awarded group points to those groups that successfully completed the games on time.

Unlike Teacher H3, Teacher S4 did not seem to be concerned about such painstaking management of her class. On the other hand, for this teacher, doing the class work without much burden on herself and the students seemed to be the priority. Teacher S4 revealed her tendency of not wanting to create management burdens in her comment that she thought she would do a role-play sometimes, but she "never got around to doing it." Teacher S4's idea of doing a role-play was simply having the students act out the scenes. For such acting out, she would have provided the dialogue for memorization. At the same time, she would have worked with the students on memorization and checked to see if they had carefully memorized the dialogue. "Checking [would not have been] simple" (Teacher S4), and these procedures would have gotten in her way of doing the regular class work of practicing the main sentence patterns and playing simple and fun games. As a result, the teacher played the recorded role-plays on the TV screen for the students to watch and read through the dialogues, providing some explanation. As her principle was not to put pressure on the students in English class, the atmosphere in her class seemed relaxed and in order. Her students could do the work of learning sentence patterns and the game-like activities without much trouble. Lack of time was not an issue. The teacher did
not want to break away from this smooth running of her class since doing so might cause distressing management problems.

In the case of Teacher J4, class management was a more pressing matter. This teacher emphasized the listening ability of her 4th graders, and for the main sentence patterns, she had her students repeat some of the lines individually in front of the class. Making sure that her students were able to hear the patterns and repeat them correctly seemed an important part of her class plan. This teaching decision was bound to create management demands, for her students could not stay attentive through the entire process of the work. As a solution to this management issue, the teacher assigned the whole class to the job of evaluating the performance of each student along with the teacher herself. These fourth graders were engaged in listening to their classmates repeat the main sentence patterns over a stretched period of time, and this did not seem to serve any purpose other than to allow the teacher to keep her class in order while she was checking her students’ performance and consequently completing her evaluation work.

The teachers’ tight structuring of activities allowed the students to move smoothly through the activities and enabled them to complete the activities on time. On the other hand, this tight structuring seemed to prevent opportunities for spontaneous communication in which the students could have had a try at their own “English talk.” Games and communicative activities are, by definition, opportunities for “trying out” the language, and the success of such activities can depend on the way the teachers manage them. The twelve teachers managed the activities fairly well, and the management tended to focus on the smooth presentation of the class work without complications. However, activities encouraging communication require an open-ended atmosphere allowing trial and error, and consequently complications. The teachers’ management tendency to avoid these complications seemed to create an environment that could not foster communicative language practice.

3. Individualized Curriculum Interpretation

A third theme can be identified as notably individualized interpretation of the curriculum, especially among the upper grade teachers. In teaching, it is understood that teachers interpret curriculums according to many different factors and create classes of their own. This personal interpretation among the twelve teachers resulted in classes that deviated from the curriculum suggestions and significantly varied from one teacher to another.

1) Upper Grade Teachers

Personal variance in each teacher’s curriculum interpretation was greater among the upper
grade teachers. In the 5th grade, Teacher Y5 conducted her class according to her goal of practicing the main sentence patterns, and she did not focus explicitly on any other language point. Watching the main conversation scenes and practicing the sentence patterns along with games and songs were what she interpreted from the curriculum as proper work for her 5th grade class. The teacher mentioned that she did not do much of the review since the necessary work for learning the content was done through the drills and activities. Her 5th graders were doing the minimum amount of copying words and sentences, and the teacher seldom used the blackboard. Teacher Y5's understanding of the curriculum seemed to create minimal work in a more relaxed atmosphere.

The other 5th grade teacher, Teacher K5, had quite distinctive classroom scenes from Teacher Y5's. While asserting that learning sentence patterns was the central point of all, she, for one thing, made use of the blackboard a great deal. She believed that written words and sentence patterns could facilitate her students' learning, and because her students were already heavily influenced by extra-curricular English work through the written mode of English, the written mode in class would not interfere but rather reinforce their learning. The teacher interpreted the curriculum suggestion of using the written mode to the extreme. This teacher wrote patterns to learn on the board and explained them; she wrote on the board sentences to use in the games and reviews and went over them with the students. Students would copy the sentences to do activities and for homework. Teacher K5 was certain about her position: she did not think teaching 5th grade English class mostly through the conversational mode was appropriate. Within her rationale, she focused on the social environment outside class, including the middle school curriculum, where English would be taught mainly through the written mode.

This influence of the middle school English curriculum was more apparent in the interpretation of the 6th grade teachers of their curriculum and in their decision-making for class work. All six 6th grade teachers seemed constantly aware of the middle school English curriculum factor and seemed to restructure their class accordingly; yet, divulgence among the teachers was evident. While all six teachers were implementing main vocabulary and sentence pattern memorization and dictation tests, some teachers were conducting the class with a focus on practicing the main sentence patterns, and others were moving evidently towards grammar understanding and vocabulary expansion. Teacher S6 argued that once the students got into middle school, they would have to read long written texts, and they would not be able to function successfully without preparation at the elementary level. As a result, she had as a rule if any students could not say the right words while playing games, they would have to write the words ten times.

Another teacher who was into learning more words through writing and preparation for middle school was Teacher Y6. Her major focus was expanding her students' vocabulary.
I felt this [need for vocabulary extension] most strongly when we did the job survey. All they wanted to be was a police officer, a teacher, or a doctor. They wanted to be something else, but since they did not know the words, they simply said, "Write in 'Teacher'" [in the opinion poll chart]. Their vocabulary will never grow that way. And I think they can learn through writing. I will probably bring in dictionary work next semester so that they can look up the words and practice writing more sentences. (Teacher Y6)

Teacher K6 and Teacher M6 were not relying as much on written form. They both were spending more time on the learning sentence patterns through repetitive aural/oral drills. According to Teacher K6's interpretation of the curriculum, the goal of 6th grade English was to have the students know the patterns and the words that appeared in the dialogue conversation. Even though she gave dictation quizzes at the end of each lesson, she did not emphasize knowing extra words and being able to write sentences. Also, she seemed to discourage her students when some of them would try to show off little pieces of grammar analysis or words they had learned elsewhere. She was aware that many of her students were reading from memory and would soon forget the words once the lesson was over. However, she did not worry about that fact or attempt to improve the situation. She seemed to have decided that she was going to stay with only the goal of learning the language patterns, believing that knowing at least those could help the students in middle school. Also, most of all, she held onto her judgment that crowding more into a limited time could only lead to confusion and loss of interest.

Teacher M6 was fairly similar to Teacher K6 in focusing on learning the main sentence patterns and not much on sentence writing. On the other hand, this teacher was not at peace with her students' problems in reading and considered this a serious matter. She had some ideas to resolve the reading problem, and in fact, she was the only teacher who seemed to have some ideas on how to teach reading instead of just telling the students to read. It seemed as if she had intentions to try some reading work with her students when she could manage her time.

Finally, Teacher W6 was in a somewhat different situation with her more advanced students in a private school, and her understanding of the curriculum was expectedly somewhat unique. She described her students as being eager learners for the most part and able to handle the class work well. This teacher did not seem to think ahead about the middle school English curriculum the students would be facing the next year. She was not much into teaching vocabulary or explaining grammar. Rather, she seemed to apply different teaching ideas she was getting from her graduate work and her particular opposition to the curriculum constraints on using the written mode. She reported that she had tried letter writing with her students based on the whole-language approach, and her students' work was satisfactory in general. This teacher's
interpretation of the 6th grade curriculum seemed fairly individualistic and distant from the curriculum.

2) Lower Grade Teachers

The two 3rd grade teachers took practicing the main sentence patterns (as presented in the lesson titles) as their goal. Based on this goal, the teachers taught their classes utilizing their own materials and games. The games suggested in the textbook were looked over, and the teachers did not seem to bind themselves by the suggestions. They brought in the games they were familiar with and which were simpler to apply. They were not even familiar with the content of the textbook or the teacher's manual except for the main dialogue. Teacher S3 seemed to assign great importance to name identification practice of objects for her 3rd graders. She would use personally prepared picture cards and repeat the procedure of practicing naming the objects at the beginning of every class period. On the other hand, Teacher H3 was more focused on exchanges: she applied many different kinds of games for the purpose of language exchange and was not familiar with the games suggested in the textbook.

Divergence from the curriculum did not seem as strong in the 4th grade teachers' classes as was the case in the 3rd grade classes. However, the two 4th grade teachers' reading of the content of the work was largely different. Teacher S4 considered the content of the 4th grade textbook simple and easy for the mentality of her 4th graders. The result was her class having some free time on hand. The teacher had her students practice the patterns sufficiently and supplemented the lesson with some songs and chants. To enliven the atmosphere while singing, the teacher invented some actions to go along with the songs and chants and taught them to her students. She maintained that "Up until 4th grade, English [was] mostly about having fun." She also briefly commented that some of her students had a hard time identifying the alphabet and added that she could not do anything about it.

On the other hand, Teacher J4, while trying to go along with the textbook suggestions for class work, contended that there definitely was not enough time to do the necessary activities such as games. This teacher showed some concern over the difficulty some of her students were experiencing with reading words. She seemed quite troubled by this, for she was not sure how to help the students with reading, and her worries were not simply about a lack of time. For this teacher, 4th grade English was not about fun at all but about serious work.

The teachers' individual interpretation of the curriculum is anticipated to meet each specific group of students' particular needs which any curriculum or textbook is not capable of foreseeing. As expected, the twelve teachers interpreted the curriculum differently, and they organized their classes according to their interpretation. The result was elementary English
classrooms with considerably different faces depending on the teacher. The classrooms seemed to diverge substantially from the curriculum, and the individual classrooms of the same grade looked significantly dissimilar.

V. CONCLUSION

Thoughts behind instructional decision-making analyzed from the narrative recollection of twelve elementary school teachers of their class work were found to be identifiable under the following three themes: teaching orientation, management orientation, and individualized interpretation of the curriculum.

The tendency toward simply teaching instead of providing an actual learning environment is what teachers are accustomed to in the classroom. This long tradition of “teaching” would be hard to change even in the language classroom where students’ learning, not teachers’ teaching, was the focus. As many language acquisition scholars maintain, the optimal condition for language learning is when the learners are doing the learning. Considering this argument, the twelve teachers’ inclination toward simply teaching could be interpreted as a barrier to the students’ learning. These students seemed to be given knowledge (usage) of English disproportionately more than opportunities to use it in a simulated communication environment in the classroom. Lacking in “knowing how” (Preece, 1994, p.42), the teachers put great effort into their “teaching” English, which was not likely to yield the matching positive return of their students’ “learning” English.

General agreement on effective methods and techniques for language learning emphasizes the positioning of students in the center of language learning scenes and the teacher supporting them through proper steps in the scenes. While teaching/learning language material is the very basic step, the opportunity to use the language needs to be considered as an essential step. The twelve teachers’ thoughts behind their class work decisions did not show that understanding. Rather, they tended to lean, to a high degree, toward the other pole of “teaching” language material. This may be caused by lack of awareness on the part of the teachers that the use of English in the classroom is more essential than knowing about the language. Moreover, the teachers did not seem to grapple with the idea that the goals of instruction in language classes are different from those of content classes (Richards, 1990), and, consequently, methods have to be different. The teachers coming from the “old school” of English learning may have felt uncomfortable applying the language teaching methods for communication (Kim, 1998). Furthermore, the school environment in many aspects was not favorable for the teachers to function positively as a supporter for communicative English work. This fact is connected to the second theme of the
teachers' decision-making factors, namely, management orientation.

In the ideal classroom, a teacher would have to be a controller, a director, a manager, a facilitator, and the resource (Brown, 2001) collectively and manage their students' learning process for a successful outcome. In the reality of the twelve teachers' classrooms, the teachers seemed to be significantly occupied with management (i.e., the controller role), and not enough resources were left to play other roles in any significant way. The teachers were expected to handle teaching a subject course distinct from the other subjects; however, all twelve teachers were skilled and prudent managers who led through the maze of drills, games, quizzes, and singing with 40 some students in a class, which was unquestionably large for a typical language class. In this not-so-favorable condition to be a fruitful language classroom, the teachers seemed to be more attentive to the final quantity of work finished than to how the work was done to be meaningful for learning. Consequently, the teachers concentrated more on managing their class through various work schedules than on providing their students with a real language learning experience.

Skillfully managing class work under a tightly preplanned class structure was what Wong-Fillmore (1985) found as an effective teaching method that worked well with young students who were not eager to verbalize. However, such management decisions were rooted in the teacher's final goal of producing language learners, not from other administrative reasons. In the case of the twelve teachers, the final goal was more focused on administrative management than on language learning management, and this could pose a problem for elementary English education.

The last theme overarching the teachers' decision-making thoughts can be identified as the teachers' slant toward an individualized interpretation of the core of the curriculum. The teachers' interpretation of the curriculum varying from one teacher to another due to personal preferences or from the curriculum itself to a certain extent is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. It is a job asked of classroom teachers to construct their classroom according to their creative interpretation of the curriculum and the textbook. The twelve teachers appeared to have done this job of flexible interpretation confidently. On the other hand, this creative interpretation seemed to digress from the curriculum more than to support it. In the course, each teacher in varying degrees neglected the core of the curriculum to some extent. Some teachers were too eagerly responding to the extra-curricular influence from outside their school. Other teachers formed a flexible interpretation of the curriculum by doing a minimal level of work instead of active extension. The teachers stated that they, in general, had seldom shared with other teachers their opinions on how to teach their classes and did not know how other teachers taught English classes. This atmosphere seemed to be working as a breeding ground for some of the rather extreme interpretations of the curriculum.
In conclusion, it is this study’s observation that in the twelve teachers’ thoughts behind their instructional decision-making, oral communicative competence building was not concretely present. Facing time constraints and classroom management concerns, the teachers’ thoughts seemed to be more on teaching the given syllabus with minimum complications. The teachers seemed to consider methodological details involved in communicative activities as simply frills required only to make English learning more fun and, therefore, could be omitted. Consequently, English activities were provided without a communication-inducing atmosphere, and English became more or less an object to teach (Tedick & Walker, 1994).

VI. IMPLICATION

This study raises three points of educational implications. The first is the necessity for raising awareness in elementary school teachers and teacher candidates of the important role methodological details play in language teaching. The twelve teachers in the study were generally aware of the theoretical principles and approaches supporting the current elementary English curriculum and the textbook. Nonetheless, the teachers were not keenly aware that the methods which called for certain communicative activities to be completed were essential for the classroom activities to contribute to the final goal of communicative competence building. In other words, the teachers had not built proper competence in pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) to teach English (i.e., the knowledge of English teaching approaches, methods, and techniques along with the knowledge of the subject, English). Without this understanding, as Shulman argued, teaching cannot generate successful learning. Courses at teacher’s colleges or in-service training need to invest more time in training teacher candidates and classroom teachers for this critical knowledge so that this knowledge can function as part of the teacher’s working knowledge in the actual teaching setting.

Secondly, this study suggests a system coordinating “teacher talk” among elementary English teachers. Teachers’ sharing information and opinions on teaching English and reflecting on their teaching in the course are valuable assets to the teachers as clearly shown in the research arguing for the importance of teacher reflection for the improvement of their teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

The last point raised is the need for overall improvement in the classroom environment in elementary school, especially in the size of English classes to relieve the teachers of unnecessary management burdens.

For research related implications, this study raises the need for more in-depth studies on language teachers’ teaching philosophy and resulting actions. For this purpose, the exploration
of teachers' narrative on their “mental lives and how they conceive their classroom teaching” (Freeman & Richards, 1996, p.2) could be an effective method. As teaching is considered a thinking process (Freeman & Richards, 1993), this teacher reflection can bring about a deeper understanding of teaching performed in the actual classroom. At the same time, this “teacher talk” could enable the implementation of new educational concepts and solutions to problems based on the teachers’ perception of the authentic classroom they create and experience (Freeman, 1989; Prabhu, 1992). Research into teacher cognition through teacher articulation can portray a more accurate picture of elementary school teachers’ perception of language teaching and, as a result, a more comprehensive picture of the elementary English classroom.

Finally, this study is a small attempt to discover the thoughts behind teacher decision-making in the Korean elementary school English classroom. The teachers' teaching behavior and thoughts behind it were collected solely through their recollections of their teaching without the actual observation of their classrooms. With this methodological shortcoming and its size and scope, this study needs to be seen as a small step in the direction of developing a generalized understanding of elementary English teachers’ instructional decision-making process.

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