When Advanced English Learners Study in a Lower Class: 
Focusing on College-level Students

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The current study examined the effect of the level-specific differentiated English 
instruction on students in a Korean university. For this inquiry, nine students with high 
speaking ability who were taking a regular, intermediate class were chosen from three 
linguistically heterogeneous classes, and were compared with other advanced nine 
students taking linguistically homogenous advanced class. The research was conducted 
in qualitative and quantitative manners. Students as well as the class teacher were 
observed and interviewed. On the other hand, their speaking skill improvement was 
evaluated by the teacher. The analysis of the qualitative data uncovered that the degree 
of students’ feeling challenged, their participation, satisfaction, interest in class, and 
interaction with their peers were characterized differently by the class level in terms of 
four categories: instruction level, students’ personality, their roles in the class, and the 
class instructor. The extent of students’ speaking skill improvement by taking their 
English course for a semester was different depending on the class level; students in the 
advanced class showed significantly better improvement than those in the regular, 
intermediate class. The findings of the study shed pedagogical implications for English 
teaching to Korean college students and Practical English course development in Korean 
universities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Level-specific differentiated English instruction has been taken for granted for several 
decades in Western universities since remedial English language class was established for 
ESL or international English learners. As a result, primary research focus on ESL instruction 
has been driven to developing and maintaining empirical systematic placement procedure 
(Davidson & Cho, 2001). Yet, in Korea, compared to the long history of English education in 
higher education, it has not been long since the differentiated English instruction attracted 
attention from English course developers. Still, there are more universities failing to adopt
level-specific English course infrastructure than ones which utilize it (Jeongsoon Joh, 2002). Furthermore, the placement procedure to operationalize level-specific differentiated English instruction has not been systematized yet, making use of primarily three methods. According to Jeongsoon Joh (2002) as of spring semester, 2001, among 20(30%) out of 67 surveyed universities accommodating level-specific differentiated curriculum, 1) seven universities, administer a standardized commercial English test to all incoming students to determine their English level. 2) Another seven use students’ scores on English subject in College Scholastic Ability Test or on an English test locally made and administered at the entrance of the university. Finally, 3) remaining universities depend on student’s own choice for English class level. Certainly, the last case cannot be a valid procedure in that students are not always so diligent and honest to report that their English level is high enough to take an advanced class at the expense of a good credit, which otherwise might be warranted by taking a lower English class.

Under the situations where no differentiated English instruction is provided or a placement procedure does not properly function, there exist a good deal of problems and complaints from teachers and students as well about too wide range of student’s English proficiency in one class. Remedial English instruction ignoring students’ current English level and needs or misplacement of students would certainly impair the efficiency of the English course and provide disservice for learners.

With a full recognition of the current situation of English education in Korean universities, the current study was conducted under a Korean university utilizing the third type of placement procedure in offering level-specific English instruction, which allows students to choose their designated English class on their own. The aim of the study is to see how students perceive, behave and interact with a teacher and their peers, and what they gain after all when being placed or choosing to be in the regular class, which was relatively lower than a class presumably fit to them. For this purpose, the students in the regular class with advanced English proficiency equivalent to those in an advanced class were observed, interviewed and measured in term of the skill improvement in comparison with those in an advanced class.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There have been sufficient studies on issues of differentiated English education in secondary schools in Korea. In particular, this kind of research has been very actively conducted since the 7th Koran national curriculum recommended differentiated English education in secondary schools. For instance, many scholars comparatively illustrated advantages and disadvantages of the differentiated English instruction in the secondary
education in terms of learners’ affective factors, teachers’ burden, logistical efficiency and cost, and assessment issues (Byung-Kyoo Ahn, et al., 2005; Chan-Kyoo Min, 1999; Ki-Wha Park, 1998). And some others examined the effect of differentiated English instruction on secondary school students. Most agreed that it could advantage high level English learners, but various concerns have been addressed for low level students (Sang Ok Park, 2006; In-sook Shin, 2005). Others attempted to provide ways to accelerate the benefits and effectiveness of the differentiated English curriculum in secondary schools (Ho Seoung Choe, 2002; Doo-Bon Pae, 1997; Hyesook Park & Gil Rye Moon, 2000; Woong-Jin, Yoon, 1998).

Yet, surprisingly no study up to date has addressed the same issue in the higher education context in Korea. The emerging need of differentiated English instruction in practical English programs at colleges was addressed with secondary research foci in some studies which focused primarily on evaluation of Practical English program in a Korean college (Hwaja, Lee, 2000; Jun-Eon Park, 1997) and a procedure of reforming Practical English course in a college (Seikyung Cho, Sung-Chul Moon, & Kang-Hyuk Lee, 1997).

The need of the level-specific differentiated English instruction can be justified from an argument that as learner’s language learning progress proceeds to a more complicated form and specified function, learners with different levels possess different linguistic needs and demands (Brown, 1995). Hence, to assist this progress of language learning, it would be efficient to accommodate English class with linguistically homogenous students (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001; Slavin, 1987; Yalden, 1987). In addition to the theoretical underpinning, college students themselves show their preference of level-specific differentiated instruction as reported in some survey-based research (Dong-Su Chong & Hae-Dong Kim, 2001; Mi-jeong Song & Yong-Yae Park, 2004; Kiwan Sung et al., 2004). For example, Dong-Su Chong and Hae-Dong Kim (2001) illustrated that about 70% of the university students responding to a survey revealed much preference of the level-specific English instruction, and that even most of all graduates (96%) agreed on level-specific English class reorganization. The same was true in the study of Kiwan Sung et al. (2004), reporting that 75% of the survey respondents displayed the needs of level-specific curriculum. Students’ demanding needs certainly reflect their perceived diversity of their peers’ language level in a class. This wide diversity of college students’ English level may be ascribable to the current trend of English education and educational system, which makes it more feasible and easier than in the past for secondary school students to receive education in foreign countries including English-speaking nations. As a result, incoming college students’ speaking ability spanned in a very wide band, from extremely low to native-like fluency. This particular social and educational phenomenon does demand refined discrimination of the freshmen’s English level from the beginning of the first semester both for teachers and students as well.

In fact, there have been endeavors to take into consideration the students’ diverse
language level and needs in Korean universities in the process of reforming practical English curriculum. Kiwan Sung et al. specifically demonstrated the development procedure of a level-specific English curriculum in a Korean university. Based on students’ needs analysis performed by a survey, they designed 4-tied level-specific English course in compliance of the G-TELP (General tests of English Language Proficiency) levels. Then they specified goals, language functions and standards accompanying remedial and intensive course for each level.

In a context of more specialized university, industrial university in Korea, in order to develop a desirable curriculum and an appropriate teaching methods and model, Kyung-Hee Suh et al. (1999) and Dong-ok Kim et al. (1999) stressed the importance of consideration of students’ own level and needs as well as university-level educational goals and contextual characteristics. Some studies illustrating Practical English program evaluation (Hwaja Lee, 2000; Jun-Eon Park, 1997; Mi-jeong Song & Yong-Yae Park, 2004) introduced briefly the placement procedure in their universities for level-specific instruction with emphasis on the importance of the level-specific differentiated curriculum for Practical English course. For instance, according to Song and Park (2004), Seoul national University makes use of TEPS (Test of English Proficiency developed by Seoul National University) for a placement procedure into three-level English course.

Still, judging from findings in Jeongsoon Joh (2002), the current situation in Korean universities regarding level-specific English education seems very discouraging; only 20(30%) out of 67 surveyed universities adopted differentiated English instruction, and the placement procedure was not yet systematic and lacked validation procedure. More discouraging is that there has been none of research empirically investigating the effect of the level-specific instruction in higher education.

Recognizing the importance of the differentiated curriculum in Practical English program in the college level and yet, scarcity of an empirical study supporting use of level-specific instruction, the current study examined the effect of the level-specific differentiated English teaching on students. Specifically, the study attempted to compare the degree of students’ feeling challenged, participation, satisfaction, and improvement, when they attended a linguistically homogeneous advanced, and linguistically mixed regular class.

III. METHOD

1. The Context of the Study

The study was performed in a large university in Korea. The university requires
incoming students to fulfill two-course four credits of English class requirement, one course chosen from either English writing taught by native English speakers or English reading by Korean teachers, and the other required course of Communicative English (CE), a speaking class. The CE and English writing courses offer two levels of instruction, regular and advanced, on a voluntary basis. More specifically, students who think their English skill is too high for the regular level and can prove it with a score on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) can be waived from the English requirement and gain A grade, A without actually taking the course. Even with the exemption, if they want to take an English course, they can register for the advanced class. Alternatively, students can voluntarily take the advanced course as a fulfillment of the requirement without verifying their English skill on TOEFL, which attracts only very courageous and conscientious students. Expectedly, the number of students registering for the advanced writing and speaking class has been very small, only to lead to holding one small size class for each every semester. That is, due to students’ tenacity to their GPA, only less than 10 students register for the advanced class every semester. This exceedingly small number of students in the advanced course does not make sense considering a total number of freshmen, which is more than 5,000, and the general prestige of the university in Korea. Logically, there has been a good deal of doubt on students’ voluntary choice and concern on lack of objective measure of students’ English proficiency for a placement procedure.

The scope of the study is limited to the CE class. The CE class holds only two hours in a week. As the course title indicates, the CE course aims to improve students’ everyday conversational skills, rather than focusing on academic English. As noted, all CE classes are taught by native English teachers. The number of the classes held every semester was about 110, and 25 teachers were responsible for teaching the classes. Course materials, syllabus, and even the grading system are not standardized, which means that a good deal of flexibility exists depending on the class teacher. Therefore, in order to eliminate potential teacher effect on students’ learning, which may have been caused by having different teachers in the same level of English course, I narrowed down the research to three regular CE classes taught by one single teacher, who at the same time, taught one advanced CE class offered in the university at the particular semester. Admittedly, this was one of the fettering factors that constrained the number of subjects for the study. Although I recognized that in other CE classes there would have been far more students who were representative of the population intended for the study, they were not solicited in the present study as they were enrolled in classes taught by other teachers. The three regular

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1 Although the university recognized the problems caused by absence of the official placement procedure, some logistical problems related to cost and human resource delayed development of the placement procedure. The university is now seriously examining use of a standardized commercial exam for the placement purpose.
classes under focus were held for approximately 20 students each, and there were nine students in the advanced class.

To briefly describe the CE classes, the three regular classes proceeded in a similar fashion in terms of the syllabus, course proceeding, contents, and topics. The course handled light topics in social events such as social stereotypes, ageism, career values and etc. Meanwhile, in the advanced class the teacher taught more difficult and diverse English expressions with some more academic topics such as technology and modern art. Thus, the primary syllabus adopted by the teacher was theme-based provided that the topics of the regular course were developed from social stereotypes and those of the advanced, from modern society.

The two different levels of the course were held basically in the same manner utilizing Communicative Language Teaching approach; the teacher tried to provide more opportunities to practice English in class with minimal instruction of focus on form and to organize friendly mood allotting most of class hours for group work and discussion.

2. Participants

The subjects in the study were nine students in the regular, intermediate-level class, whose English skill was advanced enough for the advanced class. The comparison group of students was the entire nine students enrolled in the advanced class. As mentioned, they were all taught by the same teacher during the spring semester, 2006. Early at the beginning of the semester, the teacher listed up the students in the regular class whose English competency matched those in her advanced class. From the CE three regular classes, she informed me of the list of 9 people with their brief profiles, 2 from one, 3 from another and 4 from the other class. Coincidently, there were also nine students enrolled in the advanced CE class. Students in the regular class were identified by A to I, and advanced, 1 to 9.

The nine students in the regular class and other nine in the advanced represented varied experience of English learning prior to the university entrance. For example, some spent several years in an English–speaking country in their middle or high school and others were graduated from foreign language school in Korea. There were two female and seven male students among the regular-class group, and four female and five male students among the nine advanced-class group. Because many had not taken any standardized English test before like TOEFL, it was not possible to accurately measure their speaking ability at the beginning. Table 1 summarized background information of the subjects.
As for the teacher, she was in her early forties originally from Canada. She was a highly qualified English teacher; she earned a masters’ degree in TESOL, had taught English in Korea and Japan for 14 years, and had been awarded twice Best teacher of the Year in the CE department. In addition, she possessed good understanding of oriental educational culture and tradition grounded on her own experience of marriage to a Japanese. As will be demonstrated later, the subjects all agreed that she was no doubt an excellent teacher.
3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Making a fine judgment about the effect of differentiated English instruction on the advanced group of students should not be based on a sole evidence. Thus, the data for the study were collected from a variety of angles through the entire semester. In order to examine comparative perception on English instruction including satisfaction, interests, comfort, and challenge, and their degree of participation in interaction with the teacher and their peers, I utilized class observation and interviews of students and the teacher.

Observation of the class was conducted seven times in the semester, two times in a month for each class from mid-March to mid-June. During the observation of the three regular classes, I observed only the subjects of the study by taking field-notes to include description of their interaction with their peers and the teacher, class participation, and their interest in the class or in the particular activities. In the same manner, the advanced class was observed, but this time all students in the class were on my focus.

When the semester came to an end, I interviewed the teacher and all subjects. The interview with the teacher lasted for an hour without any constructed questionnaire. Interviewing students was performed individually each for approximately half an hour. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for further data analysis. During the interview, I filled in the semi-constructed questionnaire (Appendix), which was constructed based on the prior observation, class field-notes and interview with the teacher. The open-ended questions included students’ opinions on reasons to choose the class rather than the counterpart level, their comfort level, degree of challenge given from the class, the extent of satisfaction and motivation, and their own perceived role in the class activities.

The data gained from the class observations and interviews were analyzed based on qualitative methods such as the inductive strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The field-notes taken during the classroom observations were closely examined to find out any themes or some regularities commonly driven in the data. Starting with one noticeable behavior observed among the study participants, I continuously compared it with other occurrences to see if there were any similarities and possibilities to collapse into the same category of the derived themes or needs to extract new themes. Later, the extracted themes were again comparatively analyzed against the audiotaped interview data. The data analysis conducted in this manner produced four categories: instruction level, students’ personality, their role in the class, and the class teacher.

To add more objective criterion against which to evaluate the effect of the English instruction, I asked the teacher to measure students’ general speaking skills on five components including grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation. The speaking scoring rubric was a modified version of Brown (2001). In light of the CE class goals, which focus on basic conversational skills balancing with encouraging
grammatically correct expression and fluency, the rubric was considered to be an adequate indicator of the expected improvement from students by taking the CE class. A scale of 1 to 5 was designed to measure the subjects’ speaking skills. A half point was allowed in between the major scales such as .5, 1.5, 2.5, and etc. The teacher, who possessed prior experience of grading speaking skills in a similar manner as required in the study, measured the subjects twice in the semester, early and end of the semester. The pre- and post-session scores on each individual were then compared per speaking component and were put into statistical analysis to see how they would differ by the class level.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports major findings emerging from the observation, interview of the teacher and the students, and quantitative aspects of the effect of differentiated English instruction on students.

1. Results from Qualitative Data Analysis

1) Instruction Level: The Class Was Too Easy and Not Challenging.

The prominent difference mentioned by two groups of subjects related to their class was in the class level. The class level was determined by primarily their peers, the required tasks, homework, and the materials used in the class.2

Expectedly, in general, the students attending the advanced course thought that there was manageable challenge suitable to their level. As a result, except for a couple of students, they believed that they could improve English at the end of the course. To the couple of students, Student 3 and 9, who had spent some years in foreign countries prior to entering the university, the class did not provide any challenge and improvement.

Contrarily, the advanced-level students in the regular class perceived in general that the class did not provide enough challenge for them and that the class taking was not likely to yield their speaking skill improvement. Yet, they thought considering majority of the students in the class, the instruction level looked appropriate. And even if they thought they did not gain improvement as much as they originally intended, they confessed that they, at least, could maintain their English and have chance to talk to a foreigner. The following excerpts from an interview with Student A spoke to this matter.

2 The teacher did not use any commercial textbook in the different level of the two courses. Instead, she selected reading materials from commercial ESL textbooks and other internet sources. Students are required to make portfolio by collecting provided copies of materials and their own works.
Student A: Frankly speaking, the English course was not that hard. Well, actually so easy. However, I fully understand the class must go that way. The teacher should consider majority of students in the class, not just high level students like me.

The reasons they had registered the regular class were that 1) they desired for a good grade, 2) no enough announcement was informed about an alternative advanced class in advance and that 3) there was no criterion against which they could determine if they would fit to the advanced or regular class. For the last two cases, even when they recognized the class level, it was too late to register for an advanced course due to their fixed schedule. The complaint regarding the dearth of announcement about the level of each course and some criterion against which they gauge the class level suiting them was well shown in the following excerpt from an interview with Student B.

Student B: Although I knew there were two levels in the CE course, I was not able to choose an advanced one as I did not know of the class level and other students’ level either. If I had known the content and level of the current class in advance, I might not have enrolled in the regular class.

The major part which made subjects in the regular class feel that the class was low resided in their peers. As so many interactive activities were given throughout the class, their partner’s language level was critical to determining the level of language input. Yet, when they were paired or grouped with lower peers during the class, they took active participation in the group work and made great contribution to the task product. However, this active participation in the group work did not seem to necessarily mean that they enjoyed working with group members or completing the given tasks. Rather, as much as they realized the importance of English conversational skills, they were simply highly motivated. Thus, they commented that;

Student D: I wanted to converse with the teacher as much as possible. She was the only partner that matched my English level.

Student F: I wanted to be paired with a partner whose English competency was similar to, or higher than mine.

As the statements imply, when the teacher visited groups monitoring activities, the study subjects in the regular classes became more talkative to and more interactive with the teacher than they did to their peers. In some cases, students were voluntarily looking for
chances to talk with the teacher. For example, during the interview, Student E whose English was much higher than other subjects confessed that he arrived the classroom 5 minutes earlier than others so as to have time to converse with the teacher in person. In a similar vein, it was observed that when the subjects happened to be put in the same group, the conversation lasted longer and appeared to engage them more in the conversation than when put with lower students.

On the other hand, the students in the advanced class whose English ability was comparatively lower than the couple of students (Student 3 and 9) with experience of several-year stay in a foreign country did not show any preference for group members, as far as any one of group members did not try to dominate the group discussion.

This finding implies that students are eager to find comprehensible input compatible to their current competency, and the heterogeneous class cannot offer this for them. To reiterate, a class in which students’ linguistic level is mixed can hardly satisfy the needs of high level students, who constantly look for receiving more advanced English input and monitoring their output.

2) Students’ Personality: I Don’t Speak Much in Class Because I Am an Introvert.

In general, the nine students in the regular classes, particularly during the whole class activities, were more reactant to the teacher compared to other students in the class, trying to respond to teacher’s questions to the whole class. Yet, even with the identical class conditions such as the class level, proceeding, topics and activities, the nine in the regular course were not the same with respect to the extent of their participation and engagement in the class activities. This was also true to the nine students in the advanced course. Some were always more engaged, spoke out, and led the group work, whereas others appeared passive and reserved.

More specifically, the frequency of making comments and asking questions turns to make, voice volume, and length of the speech and comments were variant by individual. However, some subjects’ relative tranquility during the participation did not mean that they were not learning. Students who stayed relatively calm, Student C, F and H made positive comments on their improvement and class satisfaction in a similar way as others did. Furthermore, it seemed that their quiet disposition was not related to the class level. Instead of talking aloud and speaking out their opinions, introverts may learn language on their own way.

This is well illustrated in the following comments by a subject in the regular class and in the next excerpt from the interview with the teacher.
Student H: Regardless of which English class I take, I might not speak out in the class a lot. It is not because I was not interested, nor because I thought the class was too easy. I talk inside to my mind and I am still trying to learn. It’s just me.

Teacher: I think that it is student’s personality that determines the degree of class participation and their interactiveness with class peers. And I also think how much a student has learnt by taking an English class depends on a student’s basic attitude as a student toward the class and English study rather than which level they are put in.

Furthermore, as the teacher noted, there was particular difference in terms of their motivation and attitude toward the class, and this also determined the level of engagement and participation in the class activities. While most subjects in the study possessed a good deal of motivation to learn English and sincerity toward the teacher, a couple of students, Student E and I, who boasted their native-like English, did not show much motivation. Thus, regardless of their extroverted personality, they displayed laziness and insincerity to the class, being late for the class quite often, doing homework during the class, and staying calm and joking around in group activities. Indeed, in the end-semester interview, they admitted their insincerity resulted from lack of motivation.

In great contrast, two other students, Student A from the regular and Student 3 from the advanced, whose English was native-like, appeared very lively and active, and engaged fully in all class tasks. For instance, they arrived in the classroom earlier than others, were very attentive to the teacher lecture, deeply participated in class activities, and submitted their assignments on time. In the end, even the class was not high enough for their level, they reported that they were satisfied with the class in that activities throughout the class could raise their awareness of importance on conversational tactics and communication manners such as turn-taking strategies and conversation organizational skills.

The outcome here may support the proposal that individual learner differences play a critical role in language learning (Ellis, 1994). Socio-psychological factors such as attitudes and motivation accounted for the degree of participation in the class, the extent of engagement, and their satisfaction with the class, and personality factors such as introversion vs. extroversion showed different degree of participation in conversational activities and their role in the group works. However, it was not possible and beyond the scope of the study to see if one type over the other would actually result in more success in language learning. At least, the study says that individual differences in fact exist, and they played some roles in the dynamics of English class in different ways, which may determine different degree of success in language learning.
3) Students’ Role in the Class: I Think my Role in the Class is Icebreaking.

The discussion here might not be irrelevant to the point addressed above. From the observation and the interview, I found that there were some particular roles which the subjects played in each class. Interestingly, in the linguistically heterogeneous group, the regular class, their roles were quite diverse depending on the type of activities. The subjects tried to lead the class atmosphere by icebreaking during the whole class discussion, while during the group work, they turned to a listener and facilitator for their less-proficient colleagues, and to an active discussant for their partners whose English was compatible to their English level. More specifically, during the group work in which they were paired or grouped with students with low competency; they often provided timely input and corrections. When group members were reserved and quiet, they often spoke up their voice and led the group. Furthermore, when there was a need to talk about the group opinion, the subjects in the regular class played a role of a representative of their group.

When they happened to be paired with one of the proficient students in the class, they confessed that they could become more communicative and interactive with the partner, as they fully recognized that their partner was able to understand what they were talking. In this manner, the linguistically advanced students in the regular class were very flexible depending on the task orientation and linguistic level of their partners. The following excerpts spoke to this issue.

Student E: I think I have to contribute to the class some, as I am a little better than others. I did it by icebreaking when nobody was talking.

Student B: I tried to assist my partners when they were in need of help during the group work. But when there was a student in the group whose English was higher than me, I tried to learn from him.

Student H: When the teacher stopped by our team during the group work, I became a moderator of the communication between the teacher and the group members.

On the other hand, the students in the advanced class showed distinctively different roles depending on their personality. When one was extroverted, he/she often played an icebreaking role during the whole class discussion, and was a loud and active participant in the group work. Meanwhile, introverted people, for example, Student 2, 6 and 8, stayed quiet and calm all the time regardless of the task type. Still, only in group activities they showed some engagement, but did not work hard to find their turns to speak, waiting for
turns to come in a passive manner, as reported in the following.

Student 2: I am a quiet person and did not have to talk much for the class processing. Thus I learned more by listening to others.

Student 8: I did not have to make any effort for the class proceeding, as many others were already talkative enough and even dominating discussions.

It seemed that introverts did not feel necessary to keep changing their roles in the class, as more extroverted others, who possessed near native-like fluency in English, formed and led the class atmosphere. Due to high level of English fluency of the atmosphere-leading group (Student 3 and 9), the introverted students thought that they could even learn more by listening to the highly advanced learners.

Indeed, the roles that a subject played in the class determined their belief in their contribution to the class. The subjects in the regular class, who played a variety of roles, reported that their roles in the group and in the whole class contributed to the advancement of the class quality and smooth class proceeding. And this belief appeared stronger among subjects in the regular class than students in the advanced. For example, in the advanced course, while most students did not provide any comments on their own contribution to the class, Student 3 confessed that if any, his role in the class would be to provide a model of how native English speakers might think and interact with others in everyday conversation as he had already experienced similar discussions and activities in his American secondary school.

In sum, the roles in and contribution to the class made by students in the study were different by the class in which they attended. The students in the regular class flexibly change their roles depending on the task type and their paired partner. They could become of icebreakers, listeners, moderators, feedback provider, and active participants. Pedagogically, the fact that they acknowledged the importance of their flexibility depending on the context may be encouraging, in that increasing variety of roles in conversation and raising awareness of reading a situational context would be important traits for coping more authentic English-use context (Brown & Yule, 1983). On the other hand, it appeared that students’ actual roles and their own recognition of the expected contribution to the advanced class were fixed. Personality was a good indicator in determining the roles in that class. In other words, in a linguistically homogeneous class, the students’ personality type of introversion/extroversion was distinctively revealing. The results shed some pedagogical implications for class teachers by making them aware of the consideration on the personality factor for the classroom management.
4) The Class Teacher: The Class was Interesting and Satisfactory due to the Teacher.

There were some differences in the class atmosphere in four classes under observation. One regular class with four advanced learners appeared very active and participatory. The other two regular classes and one advanced class were quiet and static, which led speak-outs to look dominating the class. Regardless of the class atmosphere and the class level, students in general in both groups showed great satisfaction with the class in the end-semester interview. Despite some drawbacks in the class they attended such as the low level of the regular class and the dominance of some students 3 and 9 in the advanced class, the subjects in the study mentioned that their class provided them with a few advantages.

First, many agreed that they had valuable chance to speak in English on a regular basis. The students, A, E, 3 and 9 who possessed near native-like fluency due to English education experience in an English-speaking country said that the class was a good place to maintain their English. This was possible because the teacher tried her best to let students talk as much as possible during the class. She used group discussions very often, and during the group work, she monitored every group, providing comments and interacting with group members.

Second, students thought the class went on smoothly and that the introduced topics were always discussed with fun. They ascribed these to the teacher, who possessed affectionate, warm-hearted personality, with multicultural perspectives on social issues. Some subjects such as Student E, I, F and G in the study never fail to catch chances to talk with the teacher when she visited their group during group work and even the subjects, Student C, F, 2, 6 and 8 who had been relatively silent during the class hour showed joy of conversing with the teacher.

The teacher’s salient interactive skill, teaching style and friendly manner made her class full with fun and harmony, which eventually nullified students’ complaints. Indeed, in the interview with the students their marks on the class satisfaction went in parallel to the marks on the teacher.3 There was only a minor complaint about the teacher by a couple of students in the advanced class, which was the teacher’s insufficient control over a couple of students dominating the class discussion during whole-class discussion sessions.

The findings here related to the teacher manifested very important implications. Students’ interest and motivation have been considered important factors to determine success in English learning, and the study showed that the teacher could play a significant role for eliciting interest from class participants. That is, even when the instruction level or topics in a class does not suit students’ level and their personal interest, the way the topics

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3 At the end of the interview, I asked students to grade the degree of class satisfaction and the teacher with 10 point scale.
are presented and the manner the class is handled could supplement the mismatch, or even create fun and interest from students.

2. Students’ Speaking Skill Improvement

Students’ speaking skills were measured analytically on a five-point scale by the teacher as to five skills including grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation. Given that the measures were performed early at the beginning of the semester and late after the final exam, the subtracted scores from post to pre-semester measurement on the components may well represent their speaking skill improvement ascribable to taking the speaking class. This is particularly true because I confirmed during the interview that none of the 18 students was taking speaking-skill lesson from other private institutions during the semester when the research was ongoing.

Table 2 illustrates the students’ improvement in their scores on the five speaking skills measured by the teacher.

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Mean .61 .44 .28 .33 .28 Mean 1 .56 1.5 1 .67 .67

Note: Students in the regular class were identified by A to I, and advanced, 1 to 9. G stands for Grammar, V for vocabulary, C for comprehension, F for fluency, and P for pronunciation.

At first glance, judging against teachers’ measurement, students showed improvement after taking CE class for all five skills, and in general the degree of improvement was more peculiar among the students taking the advanced course. Not surprisingly, the students whose English excelled other subjects from the beginning of the research, A, E, and I in the regular class, and 3 and 9 in the advanced class, did not show much improvement. Their profile said that they received secondary education or finished some language training course in English-speaking countries, and that they should have been exempted from any English requirement. Hence, they had no room for improvement in their English speaking skills as their pre-semester scores were already highest possible on almost all skill areas.
Multivariate tests with the scores on the five skills by the two groups, students in the regular and advanced class revealed statistical significance, Lambda(5, 12) = 12.17, p < .05. Yet, the results should be carefully interpreted due to too small number of sample. Further tests of between-subjects effects disclosed that comprehension and fluency showed the group effects as presented in Table 3.

<table>
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As Table 3 shows, the students in the advanced group showed more improvement partially than those in the regular class to a significant degree. This may indicate that when English learners receive instruction that is adequate to their current level, and are provided with a good deal of opportunities to interact with linguistically homogenous group of peers, they are more likely to increase their English speaking competency, particularly related to discourse level such as comprehension and fluency than those who are put in a class where they have to interact with less able learners of English. On the other hand, improvement of the skills pertaining to linguistic competency such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation was not dissimilar between groups. It is suspected that the grammar component may take longer time to improve, that improving vocabulary requires practices and study by individuals, and that it would not be easy to improve a certain skill such as pronunciation. In other words, increasing linguistic strength would be ascribed more to individual endeavor than to classroom interactions and activities.

The findings from the analysis of the pre- and post-skill measurement are quite insightful for English education practitioners and administrators. Considering that raising comprehensibility and fluency for everyday conversation would be a first priority in any speaking class, the study lends logical support to the argument that it is better to put advanced learners together. In conclusion, as far as advanced students are concerned, the study showed that linguistically homogenous class accommodates better environment leading to more success in improving discourse ability.
To summarize, the study found that advanced students in the regular class certainly felt mismatch of the class instruction to their current English level than those in the advanced class. And this finding was confirmed in the analysis of students’ improvement of analytical speaking skills measured by the teacher; students in the advanced class showed more improvement in the discourse-level speaking skills at the end of the semester. Yet, the degree of students’ participation and engagement in the class activities were closely related to their own personality and attitudes toward English learning, and not much determined by the class level. Interesting enough was that advanced students in the regular class exerted more diverse roles in the class depending on the task and their coupled partner, and that those in the advanced class behaved as the intro/extroversion personality predicated. Another thing to note is that regardless of the class instruction level, students enjoyed their class and felt satisfactory due to the teacher’s excellent teaching skills and affable personality. Thus, the classes under observation were at least, in part successful by providing good, fun experience of language learning, hopefully to last for long time in the future.

The current findings cast important implications for the college English teachers and researchers. Up to date, no empirical evidence has been provided on the effectiveness of the differentiated instruction in the college-level English class in Korea. The study adds a piece of evidence not only for importance of differentiated English instruction in Korean universities but also for some considerations in classroom management. The study stressed that 1) the teacher would be of great importance for determining class fun and anxiety level and the degree of students’ perceived satisfaction with the class, 2) as a class gets more linguistically homogeneous, students tended to preserve their personality related to intro/extroversion, and 3) the degree of students’ participation and engagement was more closely related to individual’s attitudes, motivation and personality rather than the level of class itself. In addition, the subjects in the study posed the necessity of a placement test, and some reasonable exemption criteria in compliance with a parallel grading system pertaining to English requirement policy, in order for the differentiated instruction to be feasibly operationalized and exert its efficiency.

There would be some future research suggestions driven from the current study. It would be more meaningful to discuss the study outcomes with a thorough review on what the class covered. In the present study, I did not take a close look at and compare a plausible effect of the content dealt with in two different levels of courses on course takers. Although the primary goal of the two courses was similar, which was to improve basic skills in conversational English with grammatical accuracy and fluency, the topics and issues dealt in each class were certainly different, and this may affect students’ level of speaking skill
improvement and their perception on the course as well.

Second, as the English class can be characterized by dynamics of the teacher, students, and materials, the students in the current study might display differences in their behavior and improvement when taught by a different teacher or taught with different materials. It is suggested that future study replicate the current research in order to see if the same results can be observed regardless of the teacher and teaching materials.

Third, it would be also interesting to comparatively analyze different kind and type of interactions occurring in two different classrooms. Additionally, it would be an interesting inquiry to observe remaining students other than the advanced in the regular class. Due to the role and/or contributions of the advanced students in the regular class, the remaining peer students with intermediate English ability might have been benefited. It is also suggested that further study observe characteristics of students who study in differentiated English class based on systematic placement results such as English proficiency exams and placement tests. Finally, future research should clarify whether the findings here can be applicable to different language level of learners. Further, replicating the current study with more subjects would add valuable literature to this field.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

Students’ Interview Questionnaire (for students in the regular class)

Name_________                             Department_____________

TOEFL __________ speaking(____)           Gender __________

1. Why did you choose to take the regular instead of the advanced?

2. How much did you feel comfortable in the class?

3. How interesting was the class to you?

4. How much did the class provide you challenge to your study of English?

5. Did the class provide you with motivation to participate?

6. How much are you satisfied with the class and the teacher?

7. How much do you think you improved your English after taking the class?

8. How do you think about your peers?

9. What was your role in the class or contribution to the class?

10. What if you were in the advanced class?
Applicable levels: higher education
Key words: general English, differentiated curriculum, English speaking

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