Status Quo of CLT-based English Curricular Reform:
A Teacher's Voice from the Classroom

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This descriptive case study examines an experienced English teacher's experience with the communicative language teaching (CLT)-based curricular reform in a South Korean secondary school context.[1] As a lens to understand the teacher and her context, Engeström's human activity system model (1987, 1993, 1999) was adopted as theoretical and methodological framework. In-depth interviews and classroom observations reveal that the participant teacher has had little transformation of her teaching practices in spite of her participation in different teacher education programs relevant to the current curricular reform. Central to the findings is that a teacher's beliefs and practical knowledge, both social and cultural products of the South Korean English education community, play key roles in how she operates in the observed instructional activity system. Based on the findings, the study questions the nature of teacher education programs as well as the way English curricular reform efforts is implemented and made suggestions for future direction for English curricular reform and teacher educations in South Korea.

I. CLT-BASED CURRICULAR REFORM INITIATIVES IN SOUTH KOREA

Since mid-90s, the South Korean Ministry of Education launched a series of secondary school English curricular reform policies in the so-called 6th (1996) and 7th (2001) curriculums. Among many new initiatives, as is well known, the 6th curriculum announced for the first time that communicative language teaching (CLT) would be the primary instructional method in English teaching in public schools (Seonghee Choi, 2000; Oryang Kwon, 2000). The 7th curriculum was then launched in 2001, and the tenets of CLT in the

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[1] The word, 'experienced,' which is used to describe the participant teacher in this study, is derived from the teacher's long teaching career, her participation in various teacher education programs, and her roles in the programs.

6th curriculum were further elaborated and evolved. As a final component of the 7th curriculum, the South Korean Ministry of Education announced a Teaching English through English (TETE) policy in order to maximize students' exposure to target language environments (2001).[2]

Through adoption of CLT, the accomplishment of communicative competence is announced as the ultimate goal of English language teaching and learning.[3] In order to develop students' communicative competence, introducing various communicative language learning activities, which later were reinforced in terms of task-based language learning, is encouraged in the curriculum whereas use of mechanical drills is strongly discouraged. The Ministry of Education (1998) also announced that English language learning classroom should be learner-centered, positioning teachers as collaborators and monitors in support of student learning instead of their traditional role as knowledge holders and controllers.

Yet, even with the creation of the 6th and 7th curricula emerged from the prevailing dissatisfaction over the existing school English education, thier implementations at the national level have not been as easy as many policy makers envisioned (Seonghee Choi, 2000; Guilloteaux, 2004; Sung-Yeon Kim, 2002; Li, 1998). Regarding CLT-based curricular reform efforts, in fact, many studies report discrepancies between the policy makers' intentions and the practitioners' understandings of the policy (Block 2002; Harrison, 1996; Hiramatsu, 2005; Karavas-Doukas, 1998; Li, 1998; Morris, 1984; Sakui, 2004). As a key reason, it has frequently been mentioned that policy makers' expectations about curricular innovations led to time, energy, and money spent on designing the innovations, but little attention was paid to the process of implementation (Fullan, 1994, 2000; Karavas-Doukas, 1998).

In an effort to address this problem, research has dealt with what should be considered when implementing curricular innovations (Fullan, 1996; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Kennedy, 1988; Markee, 1994, 1997; White, 1987). Among the research, Markee (1994) mentions that in order for a curricular reform to be fruitful, community members should develop "new value systems and pedagogical belief" (p. 20) along with the developments of and changes in instructional materials and methodological skills. In other words, only when people who are involved in curricular reform appreciate and adopt the new materials and methodologies with transformed values, Markee concludes, will curriculum innovation be successful.

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[2] This policy has regained attention due to the new South Korean government's announcement that English immersion programs will be gradually implemented in public schools to improve students' English abilities.

[3] Refer to Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) for detailed elaboration of the concept of communicative competence that the current curriculum adopts.

Markee's suggestions are noteworthy in that they can guide more feasible curriculum changes not only in the South Korean context but also in different contexts. His work also suggests that changes in an education policy, materials, or teaching skills do not guarantee successful curricular reform unless there is transformation in pedagogical values among people involved. This thus projects the importance of human resources involved in terms of what they know, value, and believe because all these construct their pedagogical values, which are crucial for fruitful implementation of curricular reform.

II. TEACHER AND TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM IN CURRICULAR REFORM

Fullan (2000) argues that "a strong teaching profession and corresponding infrastructure" (p. 21) are quintessential for large-scale reform to occur. Like so, teachers are the most critical human resources in curricular reform efforts in that they are the actual implementers of curricular reform at the local level (Fullan, 1996, 1992; Markee, 1997). Many curriculum reform-relevant studies in fact report that both successful and unsuccessful implementation of CLT-based curriculum reform depends heavily who the teachers are and what they know, believe, and value within the contexts they operate (Carless 2001; Harrison, 1996; Hiramtsu, 2005; Karavas-Doukas, 1998; Markee, 1997; Morris, 1984; Sakui, 2004). Given that what teachers know, believe, and value have a significant influence on constructing and reconstructing pedagogical values of their own as well as the community they function in (Auerbach, 2000), it is important to pay attention to the role and nature of teachers' belief system when examining teacher factors under any curricular reform contexts.

Pajares (1992) and Richards (1998) argue that teachers' belief systems cannot be viewed as a personal but rather a social and contextual process. Richards (1998) calls for attention to the importance of teachers' belief systems within the social contexts in which teachers have come and where they find themselves working. Pajares (1992) also argues that without an understanding of the context in which teachers work, research on teacher's beliefs is limited to an abstract level. Thus, the context-specific nature of teachers' belief system should be considered in research on teaching, and for this study, in research on curricular reform.

At the beginning of the implementation, Korean English teachers voiced their negative attitudes toward CTL-based curricular reform in a survey conducted by Li (1998). Even though some teachers had positive attitudes toward the communicative approach, they acknowledged that their classroom teaching practices were neither communicative nor reflected the TETE policy fully (Seonghee Choi, 2000; Sung-Yeon Kim 2002). More recently, Guilloteaux's study (2004) shows that a large volume of Korean English teachers'

understanding of CLT still does not correspond with what the government prescribes, implying that CLT is not being implemented in classrooms effectively.

As a way to overcome these concerns and to nurture what Fullan (2000) calls "a strong teaching profession" (p. 21), various teacher education programs, such as government-sponsored English teacher study abroad programs, CLT-relevant workshops, and development of diverse supplementary materials for instruction, have been provided in the last 10 years by the Ministry of Education. Likewise, as a part of the effort to build a 'supportive infrastructure' (Fullan, 2000), communicative English textbooks have been adopted and more native English speaker teachers have been hired at public schools (Oryang Kwon, 2000; In-Cheol Lee, 2006). Also, more and more classrooms are equipped with internet-connected computers to provide more opportunities for students to engage in authentic language, and 'English zone' is designed in some schools to create immersion contexts for students' English learning and teachers' English instruction.

Given all of these attempts by the South Korean Ministry of Education to successfully promote curricular reform, understanding how these efforts are perceived by teachers and affect their instructional practices is an important next step. With the purpose to qualitatively examine the status quo of CLT-based curricular reform in a secondary school English learning classroom, the present study includes classroom observations to document what actually comprises teaching activity as well as in-depth interviews to understand a teacher's perceptions of the curricular reform. The two research questions guiding this study are, (a) What are the experienced Korean English teacher's perceptions of the CLT-based curricular reform efforts?, and (b) In what ways do the curricular reform efforts impact the teacher's instructional practices?

III.   ACTIVITY THEORY AND CURRICULAR REFORM

Activity theory, specifically Engeström's Human Activity System model (1987, 1993, 1999) is the lens through which the participant teacher's experience of the curriculum reform is examined in this study. Activity theory defines all human actions as goal-oriented and artifact-mediated (Leont'ev, 1978, 1981; Engeström, 1987, 1993, 1999; Cole and Engeström, 1993; for second language, Lantolf 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Thorne, 2004). While people pursue their goals by utilizing various artifacts, their cognition develops and transforms as do their goal-oriented actions. Equally important is activity theory's premise that human cognition and actions are socially and historically constructed and reconstructed, emphasizing their social and historical nature. Given that human cognition and human actions are interdependent in their development, thus, they cannot be fully understood outside the contexts in which they are constructed and reconstructed

(Leont'ev, 1978; Rohrer-Murphy, 1999).[4]

As a way to depict how individual actions are interwoven and how and where individual cognition is constructed and emerges in contexts, Engeström (1987, 1999) suggests a model of a collective human activity system as follows:

FIGURE 1
A Human Activity System Model (Adapted from Engeström, 1999, p. 31)
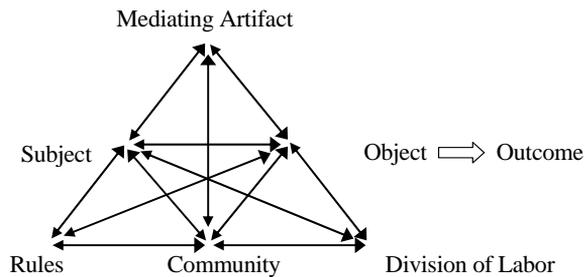
According to Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research [CATHDW](2004), the 'subject,' or the agent, of an activity system mediates various 'artifacts', both physical tools and symbolic signs (i.e. language), to achieve the 'object', namely, a goal. The 'object' is then frequently realized in terms of a visible and noticeable 'outcome'. The 'subject' also belongs to a 'community(s)' with which the 'subject' shares a common object with community members. The 'community' has a mediational role in that it frames the 'rules' and 'divisions of labor' that significantly shape a subject's operation within a particular activity system (Engeström, 1998, cited in Ryder, 2006). The 'rules' represent both explicit or implicit norms and regulations fabricating acceptable behaviors within the community. Finally, 'division of labor' denominates the role(s) of each community member in the goal-oriented activity they are engaged in. Through examination of how the division of labor is defined in a human activity system, it is also possible to see "vertical division of power and status" (CATDW, 2004, para.3) among community members, including the subject, which helps us to better understand why an activity system functions in a way but not the other due to the power discrepancy.

As inferred from the multidirectional arrows in Figure 1 above, each component in the activity system influences the other either directly or indirectly. As such, human activity

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[4] The concept of 'context' is compatible with the concept of 'activity system' explained below in this section (Engeström, 1993). In the framework of an activity system as a context, "the combination of goals, tools, and settings (including other people and what Lave, 1998, terms "arena") constitutes simultaneously the context of behavior and ways in which cognition can be said to be related to that context" (Cole, 1996, p.137).

systems function collectively to obtain the goal they set up. In this sense, activity theory proposes that a human activity system should be the unit of analysis (Leont'ev, 1978; Engeström, 1993, 1999).[5] The multilateral influences and interwoven relationships existing in human activity systems also allow us to see the 'situatedness' of human cognition and actions in that different activity systems functioning with different communities may require different rules and divisions of labor the subject should mediate to obtain a goal(Lave &Wegner, 1991).

Lastly, Engeström (1999) argues that every human activity system experiences 'inner contradictions' due to the unstable and unpredictable nature of human action. 'Inner contradiction' is the "clash between *individual actions and the total activity system*" (Engeström, 1987, p. 31, italics are original). Identifying these clashes and their causes is useful because they can reveal the status quo of an activity system. Also, the way the activity system resolves the contradictions enables us to predict its future because the resolving process can cast new forms of activity, that is, changes in the activity system (Engeström, 1993). In this sense, contradictions are a crucial force for change in human activity systems.

IV.   STUDY DESIGN

1. Participant

The participant of this study is a   female English language teacher, Mi-Ra, who was teaching seventh grade in a Korean co-ed middle school at the time of the study.[6] As is proposed in the 7th curriculum, her school has a tracking system for its English classes, high- and low-proficiency classes. There were two seventh grade English teachers at the school, and the participant teacher of this study, Mi-Ra, was teaching four low-proficiency classes.

Mi-Ra had 18 years of teaching experience at the time of the study and had participated in a series of teacher education programs some of which were relevant to the current curriculum reform. In mid-90s, for example, she went to Canada to participate in a teacher education program where she attended teaching method classes. After being selected as the winner of a local teaching competition in 2001, the nature of Mi-Ra's role in teacher education changed from being a recipient of teacher education programs to being a member of teacher education program developers. By the time of the data collection, she

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[5] These dynamic influences are not limited within the components of an activity system, but they continuously occur between different activity systems, too.

[6] Pseudonyms were used throughout this paper.

had already been involved in projects such as developing teaching demonstrations and designing communicative teaching materials for local middle school English teachers. During the latter part of this study, Mi-Ra was also in charge of a project in which a group of English teachers developed a series of task-based lessons using technology. Finally, a year before this study, she had begun attending a local graduate school for her professional development as an English teacher.

2. Data Collection

In order to understand how CLT is defined by the government as well as to create interview prompts, various documents, such as the 6th and 7th Middle School English Curriculum Manual and relevant official documents, were collected.[7] The newly designed English language textbook and teacher's guide book used by the participant were also obtained along with the mid-term and final exams administered in the school during the research period.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participant during the seven weeks of the observational period. In the interviews, the researcher asked the teacher to articulate her teaching philosophy, her own learning histories, her attitude toward learners, her beliefs about language learning and teaching, as well as her perception of the current teaching context. Also, the teacher was asked about the current curricular reform efforts and her practice under the reform, using prompts taken directly from the curriculum manuals (See Appendix for an example interview prompt). During the interviews, it was possible to gain additional information about the questions that arose during the observational period. All of the interviews were conducted in Korean, and the researcher transcribed all of the interview data verbatim and translated the data into English.

Thirdly, the researcher observed the participant teacher's two low-proficiency classes every day, one male class and one female class, totaling thirty two lessons excluding the first week of 'gaining entry' period (Maxwell, 1996). During the observation, she also recorded almost all of the lessons with both an audio-cassette and a video camera and took field notes during all observations.

Lastly, four post-observation interviews were conducted using the Stimulated Recall Procedure (SRP) (Calderhead, 1981; Gass & Mackey, 2000). While watching the recorded instruction, the teacher was asked to explain her instructional decisions and considerations as well as whatever she wanted to talk about regarding the lesson she was watching. In

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[7] In 2006, South Korean Ministry of Education issued a revised 7th curriculum in which the main tenets of communicative language teaching were preserved. The main interests of the revised curriculum are (a) to lower achievement criteria and (b) to administer tracking systems more effectively in English classes.

addition, the researcher also asked questions about the videotaped lessons when questions emerged. All stimulated recall comments were also audio- and video- recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by the researcher.

3. Data Analysis

With the complete data set from the participant, which included all documents, interviews, video/audio- taped classroom instruction, field notes, and stimulated recall interview data, the researcher carefully read each data set using Engeström's human activity system model (1987, 1993, 1994, 1999). The purpose of this procedure was to identify the essential components of the participant's instructional activity system.

At the same time, in order to substantiate the origins and complex nature of each component of each participant's activity system, the researcher conducted a grounded content analysis of each data set for the participant. In order to do this, the researcher followed the principal of ethnographic semantics (Spradley, 1979; Spradley & McCurdy, 1989) in which the meanings that people give to their verbal expressions are the primary focus of the investigation. The goal of the grounded content analysis was to understand the participant's perceptions and experiences within the contexts in which they occur.

In order to increase the credibility of the study, finally, the researcher collected data from the participant as a key informant. Additionally, in terms of "multimethod triangulation" (Patton, 1990, p. 245), interviews with students as well as relevant documents were also collected.[8] As an effort to increase the validity of the interpretations, the researcher also received feedback about her interpretation from the participant during the interviews as 'member check' (Maxwell, 1996).

V. FINDINGS

1. Snapshot of Mi-Ra's Classroom Instructional Activity System[9]

The physical arrangement of Mi-Ra's classroom included students' desks facing the blackboard at the front of the classroom with two students paired in attached desks. A

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[8] Due to limitation of space, however, the interview results with students were not included in this paper. Please, refer to Kim, Eun-Ju (2008) for this matter.
[9] The possessive in the phrase, "Mi-Ra's classroom instructional activity system," is used for convenience, but it does not mean that Mi-Ra possess her activity system at all. Instead, Mi-Ra collectively functions and operates within the instructional activity system and other activity systems she belongs to with other community members.

computer was located on the teacher's table, and it was connected to a large TV screen on the left side of the blackboard.

The majority of Mi-Ra's teaching was based on the content of the textbook, positioning it as prime mediating artifact of her instructional activity system. She also used a CD-Rom, a supplementary material for the textbook, as her main instructional artifact. Mi-Ra also provided extra handouts either prepared by her or her colleague who was teaching all high-proficiency classes. She sometimes finished her lesson by giving homework which included reading aloud or copying the texts of the textbook several times.

The language or symbolic artifact of her instruction included both Korean and English. Whereas Korean was most often the language of instruction, Mi-Ra sometimes signaled the official start of the lesson by asking the whole class about the weather or the lunch menu in English. In addition, when Mi-Ra asked reading comprehension questions, she sometimes asked them in English. Overall, however, the classroom discourse complied with the pattern of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE). Students' initiation or co-construction of knowledge through meaning negotiation was rarely observed. As such, Mi-Ra's instruction was teacher-centered rather than learner-centered; namely, the teacher holds and conveys the knowledge students need to learn, and students are passive recipients of that knowledge. This characterized the division of labor in this instructional activity system.

Finally, two objects emerged in Mi-Ra's instructional activity system; first, helping students obtain satisfactory scores on the school exams, and second, covering the content of the textbook as a way to prepare students for the next level learning. To achieve these goals effectively, her classroom community implicitly and explicitly followed the rules such as covering the textbook in a timely manner, maintaining the IRE interactional patterns, and expecting students to behave according to the normative code of behavior.

The following portrait of Mi-Ra's instructional activity system succinctly shows what each component of Mi-Ra's instructional activity system is:
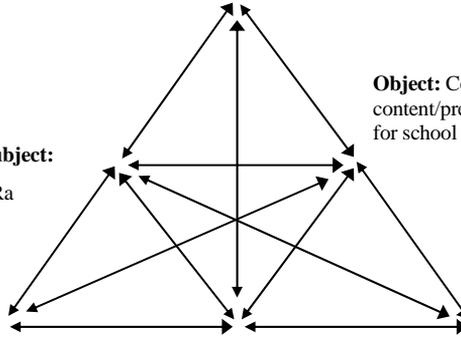
FIGURE 2

Mi-Ra's Classroom Instructional Activity System

Mediating Artifact: Lessons based on textbook /Blackboard/
CD-Rom/ Homework/ Handouts/
Korean/English/ School exams/ Increased
repetition drills

Object: Covering textbook
content/preparing students
for school exams

Outcome:
Students'
exam
scores/
more
students'
classroom
participatio
n

Subject:

Mi-Ra

Rules: Coverage of the textbook in timely
manner for school exams/ normative
students' behavior in class /survival in the
exam-oriented society

Community: Low- proficiency
students / Hee-Won / Parents

Division of Labor: Teacher controls
as knowledge holder/students receive
the knowledge in submissive ways

In the following section, the results of the grounded analysis are presented to provide a comprehensive understanding of how each component of Mi-Ra's instructional activity system is constructed. A careful examination of the origin and historical and social development of Mi-Ra's perceptions of and actions regarding each component also helped to identify the contradictions, if they exist, in the instructional activity system. Lastly, the grounded analysis illustrates how Mi-Ra responds to these contradictions as a secondary school English teacher in South Korea.

2. Mi-Ra's Understanding of the Instructional Activity System

1) Teacher Education as Impractical

In spite of her extensive teaching experience, Mi-Ra indicated that she was not in as advantageous position as some of her younger colleagues who she believed knew more recent teaching methods and spoke English well enough to teach classes in English (Interview I). Mi-Ra repeatedly called herself "old generation" in the English teaching community of South Korea (Interview I). By distancing herself from her younger colleagues, Mi-Ra stressed her position as an old timer by mentioning the lack of practical teaching methods classes both in her pre-service teacher education program and the

graduate courses she was taking.[10]

> When I was in college, there was no conversation class, what we learned- The reason why English teachers have no choice but to teach English through grammar is because the college courses do not teach (how to teach English). Like- (English) conversation- Even nowadays, **there are no courses about (instructional) activity**. (They) teach only theory.
>
> (Interview II)

Consequently, Mi-Ra's primary instructional artifact – grammar-translation methods – was based on her "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 2002) of her own schooling experience rather than what she learned in the pre-service education program. Throughout her teaching career, she recalled not feeling uncomfortable about her teaching but no other methods were available, and the grammar-translation was believed best for preparing students for exams. This shows how Mi-Ra has been socialized as a secondary school English teacher in a highly exam-oriented South Korean educational context.

Regarding CLT-based curricular reform efforts, however, Mi-Ra acknowledged that she had become familiar with the idea that improving communicative competence is now a goal of the school English language teaching classes. She particularly recognized changes in textbooks toward enhancing students' oral proficiency and perceived the changes positively. Her participation in projects developing the communicative materials and task-based lessons made her more interested in and knowledgeable about CLT. Her CLT knowledge was apparent from interviews in which Mi-Ra mentioned several key tenets of the communicative approach, such as 'meaningful practice,' 'authentic material,' and 'task-based learning' (Interview III).

In spite of her expertise regarding CLT at the discourse level and her positive attitude toward it, Mi-Ra's participation in the series of teacher education programs relevant to the current curricular reform did not change her teaching practice:

> Based on my experience of participating in the projects around twice, it required lot of my time but nothing left. <What do you mean with "nothing left" Do you mean-> **[I] do not actually use them in my class.**
>
> (Interview II)

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[10] Korean interview excerpts were translated into English in this paper. The credibility of translation in terms of content and language choice was ensured by an individual with a native-like level of fluency in both languages. The utterance in (   ) means implied meanings but not uttered in Korean. Meanwhile, the utterance in <   > was made by the researcher. Italicized utterance was originally made in English by the participant. Finally, the bolded utterances highlight the meanings relevant to each theme they are located.

As to the reason for this disconnection, she believed the content or materials she obtained or developed in teacher education programs were unusable in her own teaching context. In addition, during her participation in those programs, Mi-Ra sometimes experienced conflicts between what she believed about language learning and what the teacher education programs imposed on her:

> The instructional model they (teacher education programs) develop- according to the model, there are even PPT materials about different topics **but there are gaps between the perspective the model holds and what I think about language learning. They have caused concerns to me.**
>
> (Interview IV)

However, Mi-Ra rarely had a chance to voice her concerns about the project in spite of her position as a team leader. Instead, the teachers in the team were supposed to develop lessons following the given model, revealing the top-down nature of the teacher education program. Being doubtful about the plausibility of the lessons, Mi-Ra acknowledged that she did not consider using the lessons in her own instruction. She, in fact, acknowledged that her participation in those projects actually left her little time to prepare for her current teaching, and she felt guilty about neglecting her own teaching (Interview III). Mi-Ra concluded her teacher education program experiences were impractical and thus felt little need to adopt them in her classroom instructions. The following analysis uncovers how the complex interplay of coexisting factors within herself as well as among the components of the activity system resulted in this disconnection between Mi-Ra's teacher education participation and her classroom instruction.

2) Belief about Language Learning as Rationale for Instruction

For Mi-Ra, foreign language learning and acquisition occurs in a cumulative sequence. She believes that students first need to master vocabulary and language structures before they participate in them: "I assume that when the students master vocabulary, they would be able to listen and speak well" (Interview IV)." Only when all of these conditions are met, does Mi-Ra think that her students are ready for communicative activities. However, how students master vocabulary and language structure was observed to occur in a traditional way, that is, through memorizing and repetition drills. She refutes the government's strong recommendation for communicative activities. Mi-Ra states:

> When students make or understand sentences for communication, **I believe that they should have basic grammar knowledge, and thus mechanical practice and rote**

memories are needed. *Plus* to theses, there come the communicative activities.[11]

<div align="right">(Interview II)</div>

By using the word, '*plus*' Mi-Ra indicates that communicative activities are not core learning activities and believes that they are more appropriate during later phases of language learning. Moreover, she believes that communicative activities and games do not help students retain what they are taught since they are not learned explicitly or systematically (SRP IV). Mi-Ra believes that her responsibility as a teacher is to prepare her students for the next level of learning, and that means teaching the language systematically. Because she believes that the textbook is designed systematically, it needs to be covered in order for her students to move to the next level of learning. As such, the textbook played an important role both as a mediating artifact and an object in Mi-Ra's instructional activity system.

3) Textbook as a Primary Mediating Artifact

Mi-Ra highly values the content of the textbook and believes that it contains all the 'basic knowledge' students should learn in terms of the vocabulary, sentences, and language functions (Interview I). Most of all, she perceives that the textbook presents the basic knowledge systematically according to the complexity of language structures. The following excerpt reconfirms that Mi-Ra's understanding of language learning and teaching is constructed around language structures:

> The textbook itself- There is difference in learning stage even between the spring and fall semester. In the case of this textbook, **it is designed according the learning stage around the English verbs, such as questions using** *be* **verbs, questions using do verbs,** *wh-***questions and then verb tenses. Thinking of what was learned before, I try hard to keep this stage in mind while teaching classes.**

<div align="right">(Interview II)</div>

Consequently, Mi-Ra believes that covering the content of the textbook brings systematicity and continuity to her instruction. Furthermore, she strongly believes this is the best way to prepare her students for the next level of instruction, which results in covering the textbook as an object as well as a major mediating artifact in her instructional activity system.

Mi-Ra's understanding of the textbook shows that there is an agreement between the teacher and the Ministry of Education regarding what to teach. However, when repetition

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[11] Italicized words are produced originally in English by the participant.

drill and translation activity emerged as the main instructional artifacts in the observed instructional activity system, a discrepancy concerning how to teach what to teach in the English classroom became apparent between the two parties functioning on different levels under the current curricular reform. Mi-Ra points out a lot of repetition of vocabulary and key expressions within each chapter as the characteristics of the textbook she was using. She further acknowledges that the textbook design was better for her low-proficient students' learning:

> **This textbook emphasizes learning through repetition**. Through lots of repetitions- Hee-Won[12] says that the textbook is a little boring to high-proficient students and that most her students already mastered (the content of the textbook) (It generally) is easy. **But, for low-proficient students, because the content can stay in their brains due to the repetition, they can understand and memorize the sentences. So, I guess that through repetition, the sentences are *internalized* and thus enable students to communicate by listening and speaking.**
>
> (Interview I)

In fact, as the class observations continued, it was apparent that class time spent on repetition drills gradually increased. Toward the end of the observations, Mi-Ra made her students pronounce each word and key expression listed in the textbook repeatedly along with their Korean meanings. Mi-Ra started this activity because she noticed her students' decreasing classroom participation which, to Mi-Ra, meant students' lack of competence. Being satisfied with the students' increased voices in choral repetition drills as evidence of learning, Mi-Ra showed her confidence in using repetition drill as a mediating artifact in her instruction:

> This time, in chapter 11, unlikely the previous chapters, I am checking students' knowledge of new words and key expressions every lesson. And I think this works much better than not doing it. That is, repetition drills to students,- **I think if students realize that they know them (new words and key expressions) through it (repetition) and it becomes the base for them to express what they know.**
>
> (SRP IV)

Whereas she frequently adopted repetition drills and translation activities during lessons, communicative activities were not the instructional artifacts this instructional activity system. For instance, some communicative activities were presented at the 'Build up your English' section at the end of the chapters as a way to provide students opportunities to actually use what they learned in the form of communication. Yet, it was observed that she

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[12] Hee-Won is the teacher who teaches high-proficiency classes.

either changed the activities into the reading comprehension activities or skipped some of them, verifying that communicative activities were in the marginalized position in this instructional activity system. Pointing out that communicative activities are not enough to be a strong motivating tool for her students, she denies the connections between communicative activities and students' language learning:

> **When (students) become interested only in activity itself- this can be motivating only while it is being done, but, through communicative activities, it is difficult to teach systematically according to learning stage**. Anyhow, due to my belief I should be faithful to the content of textbook and that I should at least teach this (the textbook) well, and due to the lack of time, I rarely introduce them (the communicative activities).
>
> (Interview II)

Not only does Mi-Ra believe that the communicative activities are not helpful for her students' learning, she also points out that her students do not have the ability to complete them (SRP III). This implies that the substantial influence of her low-proficiency students on how Mi-Ra constructed her instruction in the observed activity system.

4) Students as Rational for Instruction

Mi-Ra's low-proficiency students, the community members of Mi-Ra's instructional activity system, reinforced her preference for the traditional teaching method. Basically, Mi-Ra thinks it is difficult for the low-proficient students to fully understand the content of the textbook and what she teaches in the classroom. Due to their low exam scores in English both in elementary and middle school English classes, Mi-Ra believes that, for her students, English is a very difficult subject:

> In the case of students in low-proficiency classes, **they are not even ready to take what is being taught in front of them, and many of them already experienced frustration about learning English.**
>
> (Interview II)

"It is even very challenging for them to master the 'basic knowledge'" (Interview II). Thus, Mi-Ra adheres so closely to the content of textbook during her lessons with the purpose of helping them master the content of the textbook. Student's low-proficiency also contributed to making Mi-Ra's instruction into a teacher-controlled one:

Since my students do not have an ability to memorize a word or sentence by themselves, **I believe that teacher should control their learning a lot** during classes."

(Interview II)

As stated earlier, Mi-Ra believes there are certain prerequisite skills (i.e. mastery of vocabulary) students have to already have in place in order to use the learner-centered language learning advocated in the curricular reform (Interview II). She believes that her current students are not there yet. For Mi-Ra, teacher-controlled language learning is conceptualized as learning basic knowledge presented in the textbook through continuous repetition and comprehension checks with which she can control and monitor students' learning performance. With her low-proficiency students, more specifically, Mi-Ra believes that more repetition and comprehension check activities are useful than communicative activities for which her students are not ready. This decision is legitimate based on her belief that vocabulary and language structures are prerequisites for communicative activities. The teacher-controlled lesson characterizes the division of labor in the observed instructional activity system; namely, Mi-Ra holds and conveys the knowledge students need to learn, and her students are passive recipients of that knowledge.

In addition to her students' low-proficiency, Mi-Ra was concerned about her students' low motivation to learn English. Mi-Ra mentioned that she tries to motivate her students through frequent compliments on students' performance or through discussion of possible international travel in the future. However, she strongly believes that her students are fundamentally motivated by higher exam scores (Interview II). It is thus not surprising that her goal is to enhance students' scores on school exams through her classroom instruction.

5) School Exams as Instructional Goal

While exploring how the components of her instructional activity system are constructed and understood, school exams emerged as a critical theme to understand the central activity system. Discourse relevant to school exams was pervasive in collected data, and the exams emerged as the institutional constraints hindering the successful implementation of the CLT-Based curricular reform. For instance, Mi-Ra perceives that fluency in language learning is necessary and that fluency-based approaches made students feel less anxious during lesson and participate more (Interview I). However, revealing conflicting values within herself, she admitted that accuracy because of the exams was the focus of her instruction by stating:

The situation is- Even though we might do communicative activities in classroom, behind them accuracy is required because, students need to have grammatical knowledge as a foundation for them(communicative activities) and then **students should take exam**.

(Interview II)

That is, given that the school exams included dictation tests and frequently tested discrete knowledge of the language presented in the textbooks, spending class time on communicative activities was not necessary. Instead, memorizing the content of the textbook as well as individual words correctly was an important teaching strategy to prepare students for school exams. Thus, Mi-Ra admitted that she mainly focused on accuracy in her instruction due to this institutional reality. At the same time, however, Mi-Ra believes that once students memorize vocabulary and sentences accurately, they will be able to fluently use them later on in real contexts (Interview II).

It was actually observed that Mi-Ra often primed her students for what they might expect on the school exams. Mi-Ra frequently said, "Let's underline what will be on the exams" (Nov.5), or "How many days do we have until the exam?"(Nov. 12) By pinpointing particular grammatical features, she also made sure that students were aware of what would be on the upcoming exams. As such, her classroom discourse frequently focused on gearing students' English learning explicitly toward school exams.

Mi-Ra's focus on school exams was found to be closely related to exam-oriented educational atmosphere of South Korea. Admitting that the college entrance exam is very important in her students' lives, Mi-Ra remains suspicious of the CLT-based curricular reform which focuses on improving students' language proficiency through the communicative approach. Mi-Ra mentioned:

Since (everybody) knows that English is important and the parents- Although the school is trying this (the communicative approach)- there are two kinds of private institute regarding English. One is an English conversation institute and the other is a cram school. At cram schools, they mainly teach grammar, right? But most students are going to the cram schools. <why?>to send them the school, a better school. And (they doubt) that what students learn at school is not enough. So, since it is a tendency that most students go to cram schools, parents cannot see their children stay home. They want their children to study by sending them to the cram schools. So- **because all educations are bound to college entrance exam**.

(Interview IV)

In this way, Mi-Ra recognizes that despite the government's attempts to increase students' oral proficiency, society at large outside the school is more interested in preparing for college entrance exams. Therefore, she believes that her teaching also should focus more on what students are believed to need, ultimately preparing for the college entrance exam.

In this institutional and social context, it is not surprising that Mi-Ra's concept of language learning and the communicative approach were also constructed around the school exams. Mi-Ra asserted, "when a student's exam score is good, s/he can be regarded communicatively competent" (Interview II). That is to say, in this activity system where the school exam scores are the only observable outcomes, it is difficult for Mi-Ra to perceive the concept of communicative competence and performance differently. Consequently, as is the often case in EFL contexts (Cheng, 2002; Hiramatsu, 2005; Sakui, 2004), the local definition of communicative competence is far different from what the government describes in CLT-based curricula, typifying a significant 'washback effect'.[13]

Given that school exams rarely test students' language use, Mi-Ra does not feel any need to adopt the communicative approach with students she did not believe were ready for it. Mi-Ra argues that although the high-proficiency class can do extra communicative learning activities, "there is no disadvantage for my low-proficiency students' not doing communicative activities since the exams are based on basic knowledge on the textbook" (Interview I). Therefore, as long as her class covered the content of the textbook and as long as her low-proficient students earned satisfactory school exam scores, she did not have to reconsider how she taught grammar, vocabulary, or reading even though her instructional approach conflicted with what the current CLT-based curricula mandated.

VI.   DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings indicate that the observed activity system in which Mi-Ra operates as the subject does not align with on-going CLT-based curricular reform. Many interdependent factors explain for the inertia that maintains the status quo of the observed instructional activity system as it was in spite of the growing sensitivity of the needs for changes in South Korean society. First, during her decades of English language learning and teaching experience as 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 2002), Mi-Ra has established her own practical knowledge about what language learning and teaching should be in the community. In her current teaching context, additionally, the community

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[13] Among many scholars, Shohamy (1992) defines 'washback' effect as "the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context" (p. 513).

members, Mi-Ra's low proficiency students, are another factor that reinforces her adherence to traditional methods of instruction. Due to her students' low proficiency, Mi-Ra is sure that constant repetition of vocabulary and key expressions will help her low proficient students develop the necessary vocabulary and grammar for further language development.

Above all, high stakes school exams are the most powerful factor that supports her beliefs about the effectiveness and appropriateness of traditional methods of instruction in this instructional activity system. Mi-Ra is well aware of how much her students and the community she belongs to are exam-oriented, making school exams the prominent goal of her classroom instruction. Thus, Mi-Ra believes in the effectiveness of teacher-centered and teacher-controlled instruction. In this institutional milieu where pedagogical value is constructed around school exams, it is not surprising that Mi-Ra neither perceives CLT-based curricula in a positive way nor adopts them in her classes. Consequently, in spite of her awareness of the ongoing discourse about CLT-based instruction in English education, Mi-Ra does not feel the need to change her present instruction, thus there were little contradictions emerged within the observed activity system.[14]

The findings from Mi-Ra are especially interesting because they are contrary to what some literature suggests will lead to successful implementation of a curricular reform; namely, continuous professional development of teachers is a necessary follow-up step for the successful implementation of any curriculum reform (Fullan, 1998). Instead, the findings confirm Pajares' (1992) contention that "beliefs are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems (pp. 311). That is, a series of teacher education programs that were designed to transform teachers' instructions and perceptions into the ones aligning with CLT had little influence on Mi-Ra's existing beliefs and furthermore her pedagogical values.

Therefore, this finding requires a careful review of the existing English teacher education programs in South Korea. An examination of the nature of the teacher education programs Mi-Ra participated in actually reveals that most of the programs are conducted like the curriculum reform, in a top-down manner. Mi-Ra plays the role of a passive recipient of imposed knowledge and a mechanical applier of it into tasks, but she has little or nor engagement in constructing knowledge or taking ownership of that knowledge throughout the process.

Freeman (2002) suggests teacher learning and professional development occurs through transformation of ideas into activity, and this is possible when teacher education programs focus on two main concepts: "teaching the skills of reflectivity" and "providing the

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[14] When students understand the same activity system, however, several significant inner contradictions emerged. See Kim, Eun-Ju (2008) for students' operations in their own activity systems under CLT-based curricular reform.

discourse and vocabulary that can serve participants to remain in their experience" (p. 11). That is, teacher education programs should help teachers make sense of their current teaching activities by reflecting on why they are doing what they are doing through articulation with the help of "external input"[15] (p. 11). As evidenced in this study, teacher education programs that merely tell teachers what to do but do not involve them in knowledge construction are difficult to expect transformations they expect to see among teachers. What South Korean teachers need is to experience CLT not only through theory only but also through assisted performance and following "reflective appropriation" of the performance (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 40) with other experienced teachers who also operate in similar institutional activity system.[16] Through this process of performance and active reflection, teachers are expected to gradually socialized into new ways of conceptualizing teaching and organizing their instructional activities.

However, these opportunities cannot be instituted successfully in a top-down manner. Yet, regardless of what we know about how we should conduct large scale reform, it is often the case that reforms and following teacher education programs are managed in a top-down fashion with little or no regard for localization (Fullan, 1994, 1998, 2000; Johnson, 2006; Karavas-Doukas, 1998; Markee, 1994). Instead, they must evolve out of a combination of both top-down and bottom-up efforts (Fullan, 1994) because while reform efforts will most certainly continue to be imposed by policy makers, teachers' understanding of and practice within the curricula is constructed by them within their own instructional settings (Fullan, 1996; Johnson, 2006).

In South Korea, especially, CLT represents a paradigm shift in how English language teaching and learning should happen. This type of a shift requires "a dialogic process of transformation of self and activity rather than simply the replacement of skills" (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p. 732) which will not happen drastically. There are still no guarantees that the English educational context will change even if the South Korean government were to promote a paradigm shift in how English language teachers are prepared. As discussed in this study, there are so many constraints that continue to influence what happens at the local level. They include institutional and social factors like school exams, class sizes, teachers' and students' socialization into the educational context, and subsequent belief they come to have about language teaching and learning. However, recognizing these types of constraints is definitely a burgeoning movement in the right direction to motivate change.

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[15] Theory, prescriptions, and the experiences of other people are mentioned as examples of the 'external input' (Freeman. 2002).

[16] In this context, however, the term, 'experienced,' should not be understood in terms of length of a teacher's teaching career but in terms of a teacher's familiarities with communicative language teaching in this context.

VII. CONCLUSION

By adopting an activity theory framework to curricular reform research, the current study has provided a theoretical and methodological framework in which personal, social, and institutional factors are viewed simultaneously under curricular reform. To date, few studies of EFL curricular reform have adopted Engeström's human activity system model to investigate the teachers' perceptions of and instructional practice under curricular reform. As a powerful descriptive tool, Engeström's model can help depict the different activity systems and the emerged contradictions existing in the instructional activity systems. Examinations of what contradictions emerge, why they emerge, and, most importantly, how they are resolved in different instructional activity systems can provide a more comprehensive picture of the implementation of curricular reform in diverse English teaching contexts.

As to future research, it would be worthwhile to observe a teacher in a various instructional environment or instructional activity system. This is based on activity theory's principle of situated cognition, i.e. observing how the same teacher operates in an activity system with a different community with the different artifacts. By doing this, it would be possible to see whether a changed context influences teachers' instructional practice and thus perception regarding CLT-based or other relevant curricular reform, and if so, how those changes emerge in the activity systems.

However, students' voices regarding their experiences of the CLT-based language curriculum in their learning activity system are missed in this study, which has become one of the limitations of this study. Also, because this is a case study restricted to one teacher from one educational context, the findings cannot be generalized. Examinations of teachers from other grade levels or other regions might render different findings.

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APPENDIX

An example of Interview Prompts[17]

Direction: Read the following prompts and feel free to share your understanding of and comments over them.

The introduction of the communicative approach in English Education is a practical reaction to the previous English education where students experienced trouble in competent communication although they were knowledgeable of the English grammar. This is the also the reflection of the social demands for English education for developing communication skills rather than nurturing cultural knowledge. The communicative ability can be developed only through communicative activities but not through grammar analysis, mechanical practice, or memory (Gutermmann & Phillips, 1982).

(The 7th Middle School English Curriculum Manual, p. 18)

Applicable levels: secondary education
Key words: Activity theory, Communicative language teaching-based curricular reform, Human activity system model, South Korea, Teacher belief system, Teacher education program, Washback effect

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[17] Original Korean prompts were translated into English by the researcher.