Interactions Between Beliefs, Practices, and Perceptions of Korean EFL Teachers

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This study investigates the interactions between Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs about English language education, their teaching practices, and their perceptions of the reform initiated by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST). It highlights the variable of teaching level. Ninety-eight elementary school (ET), 96 middle school (MT), and 94 high school teachers (HT) were surveyed. The findings indicate that: (1) the participants’ beliefs were largely based on the communication-oriented approach (COA), although there was a group difference with the ETs believing it most strongly, (2) the HTs’ COA-oriented beliefs did not match their teaching practices, which were largely based on the grammar-focused, reading-based approach, and (3) the majority of the participants suggested that their low English proficiencies and large class sizes were constraints on their attempts to implement the reform. In addition, the HTs listed the College Scholastic Ability Test as a constraint. These findings are believed to be symptomatic of a transition stage through which English language education has been passing in Korea. The study also interprets the findings as a result of EFL teachers’ strategic adjustments in the face of the schism between the demands of the MEST-initiated reform and the realities of English language education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the focus of research on language teaching has shifted from merely studying teachers’ behavior to also investigating the cognition that prompts such behavior. As part of this shift, teachers’ beliefs have been recognized as an important variable in language teaching (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Johnson (1994) predicted that “teachers’ beliefs [would] ultimately become one of the most valuable psychological constructs for teaching and teacher education” (p. 439).
Assumptions underlying research on teachers’ beliefs are that teachers are at the center of education and that research into teachers’ beliefs can contribute to a more realistic and comprehensive understanding of teaching (Richardson, 1996). The general consensus in the literature has been that teachers’ beliefs have a critical impact on the way they learn how to teach, the way they teach in the classroom, and the way they perceive educational innovations (Borg, 2001). This growing consensus signals that exploring teachers’ beliefs is particularly important in contexts where educational reform is a matter of serious concern. The successful implementation of any educational innovation is dependent upon how teachers perceive the reform, and their perceptions can be influenced by their beliefs about education. That is, the success of educational reform is contingent upon teachers’ educational beliefs.

This interdependent relationship between teachers’ beliefs and the success of educational reform points to the significance of research on the beliefs held by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Korea. Accordingly, many studies have investigated Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs about English language education (e.g., Kyungja Ahn, 2009; Hohsung Choe, 2005; Jaeyoung Choi, 2008; Eun-ju Kim, 2008; Kyungja Kim, 2006; Li, 1998). However, most of the studies did not include teaching level (i.e., the elementary, middle, or high school) as a variable. They focused on a single teacher, a group of teachers at one level, or treated teachers teaching different teaching levels as a single group. This manner of organizing participants may not be able to catch distinct conditions teachers at different teaching levels face, and these different conditions may influence teachers’ beliefs, teaching practices, and perceptions of the reform initiated by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST).

This study attempts to fill the gap by assuming a broader, comparative perspective that investigates whether teaching level plays any significant role in the interactions between Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs about English language education, their perceptions of the MEST’s reform efforts, and their teaching practices. To be more specific, the study attempts to explore the following research questions:

1. What beliefs do Korean EFL teachers have about English language education?
2. Do their beliefs vary with their teaching levels (i.e., the elementary, middle, and high school)?
3. What relationships do their (varying) beliefs have with their perceptions of MEST-initiated reform and their teaching practices?
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Teachers’ Beliefs and Teaching Practices

A number of studies have measured interactions between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices (e.g., Attardo & Brown, 2005; Johnson, 1992, 1994; Jones & Fong, 2007; Poynor, 2005; Richardson, 1996). The general consensus has been that there are significant interactions between the two entities. For example, Johnson (1992) employed survey, lesson plan analysis, and class observation in order to investigate 30 English as a second language (ESL) teachers’ theoretical beliefs about ESL teaching and learning. The results from the survey and the lesson plan analysis suggest that the majority of the teachers held clearly defined theoretical beliefs. The teachers’ beliefs reflected one of the three approaches, function-based, skill-based, and rule-based approaches. In addition, the results from the class observation of three teachers (each with one of the three approaches) indicate that each teacher’s teaching practices were consistent with her/his theoretical orientation. Johnson’s conclusion was that “Overall … ESL teachers teach in accordance with their theoretical beliefs” (p. 101).

Using class observations and follow-up interviews, Johnston and Goettsch (2000) investigated the relationship between four ESL teachers’ beliefs about grammar instruction and their teaching practices. They found that the teachers believed that a conscious conceptual grasp of the various grammatical points was necessary and beneficial, and this belief was reflected in their actual teaching of grammar. Borg (1998, 1999), too, employed interview and class observation techniques to investigate the relationship between EFL teachers’ beliefs and their English grammar instruction. Using the concept of “teachers’ personal pedagogical systems,” which is defined as “stores of beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes” (p. 9), Borg (1998) presented a case study of a native English-speaking teacher in a Maltese EFL classroom. The case study demonstrates that the teacher’s beliefs about explicit grammar instruction, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and student-centered grammar instruction led him to a form of classroom instruction in which he based grammar work on students’ grammar errors, encouraged students’ participation in spontaneous discussions about grammatical points, varied the pace of the lesson, and attempted to raise students’ awareness of grammar rules and features, among others. Continuing this theme of beliefs and practices, Borg (1999) found a more complex relationship than the one identified in the 1998 study between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices. Through interviews and classroom observations of four native English-speaking EFL teachers in Malta, Borg (1999) found that the teachers’ decisions about the use (or avoidance) of grammatical terminology were not related directly to beliefs they held about one particular issue. Rather, their instructional decisions
resulted from complex interactions between the teachers’ beliefs about the best way to learn grammar, their own knowledge of grammatical terminology, and their perceptions of students’ knowledge and experience of grammatical terminology. For example, one teacher, Martha, had difficulties in learning her L1 and L2 grammars, was insecure of her explicit knowledge of grammar, was exposed to CLT, and believed that her students learned English better without explicit grammar instruction. This teacher tended to avoid the use of grammatical terminology in her teaching.

More recently, Mak (2011) used questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations in order to examine the interaction between a pre-service EFL teacher’s beliefs about CLT and her teaching decisions. The results indicate that her beliefs changed as she went through a year-long postgraduate practicum, and the change in her beliefs was clearly reflected in her teaching decisions. To sum up this part of review, studies on ESL/EFL teachers’ beliefs suggest a significant degree of interaction between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices, with the former influencing the latter.

2. Teachers’ Beliefs and Educational Reform

Allen (2002) argues that teachers’ beliefs influence “how new information is perceived and whether it is accepted or rejected” (p. 520). Allen’s argument implies that teachers’ beliefs influence their perceptions of educational reform and, thus, teachers’ beliefs are related to a successful implementation of the reform.

Interactions between these two entities have been explored by an increasing number of researchers (Bailey, 1992). Könings, Brand-Gruwel, and Merriënboer (2007), for example, investigated the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of educational reform initiated by the government and the successful implementation of the reform in the Netherlands. The new policy, which was called the “Second Phase” at the time of the study, aimed to provide a “powerful learning environment,” one that promotes students’ self-directed learning, collaborative problem-solving skills, and interdisciplinary approaches to a given issue. The nature of the reform called for the role of the teacher to be “more as a coach and less as an instructor” (p. 988) and the much more sensitivity of the teacher to students’ individual progresses and problems. Könings et al. used a questionnaire to survey 142 secondary school teachers’ perceptions of the reform. Among the findings, they found that the teachers believed that classroom instruction should be teacher-centered. This belief led to their negative perception of the reform. This negative perception in turn led to the teachers’ less emphasis on productive learning demanded by the reform and more emphasis on reproductive learning which was consistent with their belief.

Many EFL countries have attempted to reform English language education since 1980s. Typically, such reform efforts have included the introduction of CLT (Kubota, 1998;
Savignon, 2003). Educational reform and curricular innovations prompted by the adoption of CLT in EFL countries have drawn considerable research interest, and much of the empirical research has focused on the impact of EFL teachers' perceptions of CLT on their teaching practices. For example, Hiramatsu (2005) and Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001) investigated the impact of teachers' perceptions of CLT on their teaching practices in the Japanese context; Anderson (1993) and Zhu (2003), in the Chinese context; Carless (2006) and Mak (2011), in the Hong Kong context; Kirkgöz (2008), in the Turkish context; Feryok (2008), in the Armenian context; and Nazari (2007), in the Iranian context. A general consensus among these studies is that top-down reform prompted by the adoption of CLT in these EFL countries have been difficult and that teachers' negative perceptions of CLT-related reform were behind the difficulty. In sum, these studies evidenced the interactions between (ESL/EFL) teachers' beliefs, their perceptions of the feasibility of a particular reform, and the successful implementation of that reform. That is, the studies showed that ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions of a particular reform, which in turn influence their efforts to implement the reform in their teaching.

3. Studies on Korean EFL Teachers

As discussed earlier, the Korean MEST's reform efforts have drawn much research interest. Li (1998), for example, employed a survey and interviews in order to investigate 18 secondary EFL teachers' beliefs about English language education and their impact on the implementation of CLT. Li found that the teachers held grammar-oriented, text-based, and teacher-centered pedagogical beliefs, and such beliefs interfered with their attempt to implement CLT. Li added that the implementation of CLT was also hindered by such internal and social factors as large class size, teachers' low English proficiency, the washback effect of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), among others.

In contrast, Eun-ju Kim (2008) carried out a detailed case study of the impact of in-service teacher training programs on a teacher participant's pedagogical beliefs. The results indicate that the programs did not play any significant role in changing the teacher's beliefs. In spite of her participation in several CLT-related in-service teacher training programs, the participant showed no change in her beliefs, which were closely related to the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and her teaching practices. More recently, Kyungja Ahn (2009) investigated the extent to which the recommendations of the MEST, particularly CLT-oriented teaching and the Teaching English in English (TEE), were instantiated in two teams of pre-service Korean EFL teachers' four-week practicum experiences at a middle school. Each team consisted of a mentor and two student teachers. Data were collected through interviews of both mentors and student teachers, classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, observations of daily team conferences, and
content analysis of journals and lesson plans. From her findings, Ahn concluded that the extent to which the reform recommendations were embraced and enacted by the student teachers depended on various factors such as (1) their “everyday concepts” about EFL teaching with which they entered the teacher education program, (2) the mentors’ perceptions of and attitudes toward CLT and TEE, and (3) the washback effect of grammar-focused, reading-based tests, among others.

The results of these studies suggest interactions between Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs, their teaching practices, and implementation of the MEST-initiated reform. However, they did not consider the variable of teaching level in their analyses. For example, of the 18 teachers who participated in the experiment of Li (1998), eight were teaching at middle schools and the remaining ten were teaching at high schools. But, Li treated them not as two distinct groups but as a single group. Different teaching levels may lead to different teaching contexts which in turn may influence teachers’ beliefs, teaching practices, or perceptions of the reform. The current study attempts to address this gap by introducing the teaching level as a variable and examine whether the variable plays a role in the interactions between Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs, teaching practices, and perceptions of the MEST-initiated reform.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

Efforts were made to recruit the same number of teachers at three different teaching levels. Eventually, 98 elementary school (ET), 96 middle school (MT), and 94 high school teachers (HT) were recruited from four different in-service teacher education programs held in three different cities as well as by personal network. The teachers were paid for their participation in the experiment.

A detailed profile of the teacher participants is presented in Table 1. The three groups were similar in terms of the location of schools at which they were teaching, but they were different in age, sex ratio, and teaching experience. The ET group was relatively young. Moreover, the ET group’s sex ratio was conspicuously skewed toward female, which in fact reflects the national ratio. In the year of 2003, the ratio of female to male elementary school teachers was close to 4 to 1 (Keunyoung Yun, 2006). The ET group also had relatively short teaching experience. This is because they listed their experience of teaching English rather than overall teaching experience. It was largely due to the system at the elementary school. English teachers at elementary schools are not all English majors. They sometimes teach English voluntarily. Frequently, however, they are assigned to teach
English by school authorities. Elementary school teachers often teach English for 1-3 years and then are replaced by other teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age (average)</th>
<th>Teaching experience (average)</th>
<th>Teaching location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Metro*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>.2 - 14</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(2.17)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24 - 42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(31.17)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25 - 58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(35.32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>.5 - 30</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(9.47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25 - 58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(35.32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1 - 26</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(9.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Metro refers to metropolitan areas, which in turn refer to cities with a population of a million or more.

2. Instrument

A survey with a questionnaire was employed to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: background information, Likert-scale items, ranking of important skills and knowledge in English language learning, and open-ended questions sections (see Appendix). In order to ensure participants' comfort and ease of communication, the questionnaire was given in the participants' native language, Korean, and the participants were asked to respond in Korean.

The information collected in the background information section has been given in Table 1 above. The second section consisted of 26 Likert-scale items. These items were largely developed from salient features identified in the interviews the author of this paper conducted with three teachers teaching at three different levels (i.e., an ET, an MT, and a HT). Part of the items were also adapted from Seonghee Choi (2000), Li (1998), and Savignon and Wang (2003). The resulting items were constructed around a scale, from 1 for strongly disagree to 4 for strongly agree. Domyei (2007) emphasizes that “multi-item scales maximize the stable component that the items share and reduce the extraneous influences unique to the individual item” (p. 104). Two to three statements that are related to the same target feature but worded differently were often used to minimize unexpected interpretation or misinterpretation of item wording. For example, in order to ask participants’ beliefs about “student-centered teaching,” two differently worded statements were prepared and used: “English language education must meet students’ needs” and “Teachers need to pay attention to students’ interests.” The Likert-scale items were intended to measure (1) the teacher participants’ beliefs about goals of EFL education
(items 1 to 6 in the section B of the questionnaire), (2) their beliefs about teaching methods and practices (items 7 to 20), and (3) their perceptions of the MEST-initiated reform (items 21 to 26).

The third section asked participants to rank English skills and knowledge. The fourth and final section consisted of three open-ended questions. These open-ended questions were intended to generate the teacher participants’ descriptions of (1) teaching methods and practices that they actually used in the classroom, (2) the degree of their familiarity with the MEST’s reform efforts, and (3) factors that interfered with their attempts to implement the MEST-initiated reform.

3. Data Analysis

Two kinds of data analysis were conducted: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative analysis was applied to the data collected through the Likert-scale items and ranking of the importance of skills and knowledge in English language education. Responses to the Likert-scale items were numerically coded (i.e., strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, and strongly disagree = 1), and analyzed using a one-way ANOVA. Tukey’s post hoc tests were used whenever they were needed. Rankings of the importance of skills and knowledge in English language learning was analyzed using the Syntax editor in SPSS.

Qualitative data analysis was applied to the data collected through the three open-ended questions. It involved a theme analysis. The responses were compressed into core concepts. Frequencies of responses which included similar and/or same core concepts were added up to compute the frequency of a particular core concept, and the frequency was eventually converted to a percentage.

IV. RESULTS

1. Quantitative Data

The first of the three parts in the Likert-scale item section included six items related to beliefs about the main goal of English language education in Korea. Table 2 presents the results of the participants’ responses to the items, showing the extent of their agreement. The results indicate that all three groups believed that English language education in Korea should be based on the communication-oriented approach (COA). However, a group

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1 The term *communication-oriented approach* in this study refers to the approaches and methods promoted by the MEST in its efforts to reform English language education in Korea. It involves emphasis on the ability to communicate in spoken English, employment of interactive and group
difference was observed, \( F (2, 285) = 10.651, p < .001 \). Post hoc tests showed that the ET group’s belief about COA was stronger than that of the MT group \( (p < .001) \) and of the HT group \( (p < .001) \), but there was no difference between the MT and the HT groups.

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items (related to)</th>
<th>ET Mean/SD</th>
<th>MT Mean/SD</th>
<th>HT Mean/SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication-oriented approach</td>
<td>3.39/.50</td>
<td>3.10/.46</td>
<td>3.11/.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar-focused, reading-based approach</td>
<td>1.74/.36</td>
<td>2.16/.45</td>
<td>2.28/.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, the majority of the participants did not believe that English language education should be based on the grammar-focused, reading-based approach (GRA), and their responses revealed a group difference, \( F (2, 285) = 35.760, p < .001 \).\(^2\) Post hoc tests showed that the ET group was more negative about GRA than the MT group \( (p < .001) \) and the HT group \( (p < .001) \), but there was no difference between the MT and the HT. In short, although the majority of the participants believed that English language education in Korea should be COA-based, there was a group variation. The ET group believed in COA more strongly than the other two groups.

The second part involved 14 items related to beliefs about teaching methods/practices. Table 3 presents the results, showing the extent of the three groups’ agreement to the 14 items. The results indicate that, all three groups believed that COA-based methods should be employed in the class, but a group difference was observed, \( F (2, 285) = 11.117, p < .001 \). Post hoc tests showed that the ET group agreed more strongly than the MT group \( (p < .001) \) and the HT group \( (p < .001) \), and there was no difference between the MT group and the HT group. At the same time, the three groups did not believe that GRA-based methods should be used in the class, and no statistically significant group difference was observed. As for the role of the teacher, all three groups believed that both student-centeredness and teacher-centeredness are important, and a group difference was not observed. However, the groups believed in the importance of the student-centeredness more strongly than the teacher-centeredness.

All three groups also believed that interactive/group activities are important, but there existed a group difference, \( F (2, 285) = 11.033, p < .001 \). Post hoc tests showed that the

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\(^2\) The term *grammar-focused, reading-based approach* refers to the approaches and methods that have been used in typical English classes. It is characterized by focus on grammar, emphasis on reading skills, translation of English passages into Korean, rote learning of words and idioms, and teacher-centeredness, among others.
ET group believed in the importance of interactive activities more strongly than the MT group ($p < .001$) and the HT group ($p = .005$), and there was no significant difference between the MT group and the HT group. In contrast, the majority of the participants did not believe that repetition or rote-learning is useful, and there was no group difference. In summary, the majority of the participants believed in the significance of COA-oriented methods/practices with emphasis on fluency, student-centeredness, and interactive activities, and the ET group tended to believe so more strongly than the other two groups. These results are consistent with the results from the first part.

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items (related to)</th>
<th>ET Mean/SD</th>
<th>MT Mean/SD</th>
<th>HT Mean/SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COA-based methods</td>
<td>3.43/.51</td>
<td>3.17/.44</td>
<td>3.11/.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRA-based methods</td>
<td>2.27/.48</td>
<td>2.39/.39</td>
<td>2.41/.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-centeredness</td>
<td>3.34/.47</td>
<td>3.28/.46</td>
<td>3.50/.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centeredness</td>
<td>2.80/.62</td>
<td>2.80/.46</td>
<td>2.69/.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive/group activities</td>
<td>3.33/.50</td>
<td>3.02/.47</td>
<td>3.12/.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitive, rote learning</td>
<td>1.97/.64</td>
<td>1.98/.57</td>
<td>1.97/.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third part consisted of six items that related to teachers’ perceptions of MEST’s reform efforts. All of the six items are worded in the way that they indirectly refer to specific reform policies. For example, an item reading “Conducting classes in English helps students improve their English proficiency” refers to TEE. Since the TEE and the Early English Learning (EEL) policies were salient in the interviews that were conducted with three teachers in order to develop the Likert-scale items, the two policies are highlighted here. Table 4 presents the results of the participants’ responses to the items of the third part.

**TABLE 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items (related to)</th>
<th>ET Mean/SD</th>
<th>MT Mean/SD</th>
<th>HT Mean/SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEE</td>
<td>3.33/.47</td>
<td>3.38/.46</td>
<td>3.34/.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEL</td>
<td>3.13/.54</td>
<td>2.88/.52</td>
<td>3.04/.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the participants perceived TEE and EEL positively. They agreed that
teaching English though English is helpful for improving students’ English proficiency. No significant group difference was observed for this issue. The majority of the participants also agreed that it is easier for children than adults to learn English and, thus, it is desirable to start English language education at the elementary school (or earlier). But their responses revealed a group difference, $F (2, 285) = 11.117, p < .001$. Post hot tests showed that the ET group agreed to EEL more strongly than the MT group ($p < .001$) and the HT group ($p < .001$), and there was no difference between the MT group and the HT group. In short, the participants generally perceived EEL and TEE positively, and, as for EEL, the ET group perceived it more positively than the other two groups. These results indicate that the teacher participants were positive toward the MEST-initiated policies and innovations. Since the MEST has been promoting COA in its reform efforts, these results reveal significant interactions with the results from the two parts discussed above. In other words, although there were some group differences, the participants in general believed in the COA-oriented goals and methods and positively perceived the MEST-initiated policies and innovations that promote such goals and methods.

The third section of the questionnaire asked the teacher participants to rank the relative importance of skills and areas in learning English language. The results are presented in Table 5. Due to the lack of space, only rank one and two are presented. The table reads that, for example, on a scale of one to seven, listening was ranked as number one by 55% of the ET group, speaking was ranked as number one by 30% of the ET group, vocabulary was ranked as number one by 7% of the ET group, etc.

With one exception, the majority of the participants listed listening and speaking either as the most important or as the second most important skills. The exception came from the HT group: 36% of the group put reading in the top rank. This ranking is interesting, compared to the fact that only 6% of the ET group and 16% of the MT group put reading in the top rank. As for reading skills which are emphasized in GRA, therefore, the three groups’ ranking formed a kind of continuum: the ET group’s ranking was the lowest, that of the HT group was the highest, and that of the MT group came between the two. Another interesting fact is that, regardless of teaching levels, only a few participants ranked grammar, writing, and pronunciation high. The majority of the participants put grammar, writing, and pronunciation at the bottom of the rank: 1) 42% of the ET group ranked grammar, 38% ranked pronunciation, and 16% ranked writing as seventh, or last, in terms of importance, 2) 50% of the MT group ranked pronunciation, 29% ranked writing, and 21% ranked grammar as seventh, and 3) 50% of the HT group ranked pronunciation, 22% ranked grammar, and 20% ranked writing as seventh. In contrast to this, none of the participants, regardless of their teaching levels, put speaking and listening in the lowest rank.
TABLE 5  
Relative Importance of Skills and Areas in Learning English Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>ET</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>MT</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>HT</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>grammar</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>writing</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>speaking</td>
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<td>speaking</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>pronunciation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>pronunciation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>writing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>writing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>pronunciation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In short, the majority of the teacher participants thought that spoken communication skills (i.e., listening and speaking) are more important than other areas of English language learning. These results are largely consistent with the results from the three parts in the Likert-scale items. However, the HT group’s ranking of *reading* (as well as that of the MT group) suggests a trace of GRA. In this sense, it can be said that at least there is an internal conflict in the HT group’s beliefs.

2. Qualitative Data

Here, the results from the data collected through the three open-ended questions in the last section are presented. The first of the three open-ended questions asked each of the participants to make a list of methods/approaches he/she frequently uses in the classroom. Some of the teacher participants wrote specific activities or practices. In such cases, the activities or practices are presented with the names used by the participants. The results are summarized in Table 6. The three most frequently mentioned methods/activities are presented here.

The results suggest that the teacher participants were aware of various language teaching methods and approaches. On the ET group’s list were songs and chants,
communication-oriented teaching, and group activities. They were listed by 59%, 53%, and 42% of the elementary school teacher participants. These three methods/activities are all features of COA-based English language teaching. Therefore, the ET group’s teaching practices not only matched their beliefs identified in the first and second parts in the Likert-scale items but also were consistent with its ranking pattern shown in the third section.

**TABLE 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Method/Approaches Listed by the Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ET (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs &amp; chants (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication-oriented (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group activities (42)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the list of the MT group were GTM (50% of the middle school teacher participants), combination of communication-oriented and grammar-oriented teaching (38%), and Audiolingual Method (34%). What is most salient on the HT group’s list is that 98% of the high school teacher participants listed GTM. The second on the HT group’s list was reading-based teaching. These two are typical features of GRA. In this respect, the high school teacher participants’ teaching practices were based on GRA and, thus, did not match their beliefs identified in the first and second parts in the Likert-scale items, although they partially matched the ranking pattern identified in the third section. What is more interesting on the HT group’s list is that 39% of the high school teacher participants listed “teaching to the CSAT” as a teaching practice they frequently drew on. In sum, the elementary teacher participants’ classroom teaching was COA-oriented, that of the high school teacher participants was GRA-oriented, and that of the middle school teacher participants came between the two, forming some kind of continuum from COA at the elementary school to GRA at the high school.

In order to measure how well-informed the participants were of the MEST’s reform efforts, the second open-ended question asked them to write about the main goal of the MEST’s reform efforts and then to make a list of the reform policies, measures, and programs that they knew of: The results indicate that the participants were familiar with

dictation, pattern practices, visual aids, content-based approach, task-based approach, lexical approach, multimedia-based teaching, Whole Language Approach, phonics, top-down and bottom-up reading skills, English only zone, co-teaching with a native English speaker, Natural Approach, Notional/Functional Approach, and cooperative language learning.
the MEST’s reform efforts. However, there existed a group variation in the degree of familiarity: 86% of the ET group, 67% of the MT group, and 60% of the HT group suggested “communication-oriented language teaching and learning” as the main goal of the MEST’s reform efforts. In addition, 14% of the ET group, 30% of the MT group, and 34% of the HT group wrote that they were not familiar with the MEST-initiated reform. This statement, however, should be interpreted to mean that they did not pay much attention to the reform because their responses to the next part of the second open-ended question suggest that most of the participants, regardless of teaching levels, were well informed of the reform. As reform policies, measures, or programs they knew of, the ET group listed English conversation instructor (ECI) system (38%), increase of English class hours (32%), EEL (26%), English Program in Korea (EPIK) program (23%), TEE (22%), to name only the top five. The MT group listed ECI (48%), different classes for students with different English proficiency (29%), National English Ability Test (NEAT) as a replacement for the CSAT (29%), TEE (20%), and EPIK (20%). The HT group wrote ECI (38%), TEE (32%), NEAT as a replacement for the CSAT (28%), immersion in English program (16%), and strengthening of in-service teacher education (12%).

The lists from the three groups reveal that the participants were particularly familiar with the policies or measures that have significant implications for their professional status or working conditions. For example, the three groups commonly listed ECI and TEE. The ECI system aims at hiring teachers with high English speaking proficiency, while the TEE policy demands teachers to conduct classes in English. Therefore, these two measures make many in-service English teachers uncomfortable, particularly those who think their English proficiency is not high enough to meet the demands. At the same time, each group listed measures or programs which were directly related to their teaching environments. The ET group listed EEL, which is closely related to English language education at the elementary school, while the HT group focused on the NEAT, which is supposed to replace the English section of the current CSAT. Any attempt to change the current format of the CSAT is the utmost concern not only of high school students but also of high school English teachers. This situation explains why the HT group listed the NEAT here and “teaching to the CSAT” in their responses to the first open-ended question. In sum, regardless of teaching levels, the participants were well informed of the MEST’s reform efforts and paying close attention to policies or measures which were directly related to their status and teaching conditions.

The third and last open-ended question asked the participants to list things that they

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[4] The NEAT is to be developed by the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation and be administered by the MEST starting in 2012. However, it has not been decided whether the NEAT replaces the English part of the current CSAT. For more information, visit http://www.kice.re.kr/ko/board/view.do?article_id=94611&menu_id=10493.
thought most interfered with their attempts or intentions to implement the MEST-initiated reform in their classroom teaching. The results are presented in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Interfering with the Participants' Attempts to Implement the MEST-initiated Reform</th>
<th>ET (%)</th>
<th>MT (%)</th>
<th>HT (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low English-speaking ability (80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge about diverse teaching methods (77)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of training specialized in English language teaching (55)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of supportive teaching materials (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large classes (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large classes (78)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low English-speaking ability (63)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of the CSAT (47)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of the CSAT (48)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive teaching load (43)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative work overload (25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large classes (33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation of students (16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of opportunities for professional development (28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three groups listed teachers’ low English-speaking ability, large classes, lack of opportunities for professional trainings as factors most interfering with their attempts to implement reform. Other factors on the three groups’ lists reveal some group differences. The ET group was more concerned with pedagogical issues such as teaching methods or materials, while the HT group was concerned with the influence of the CSAT. In summary, regardless of teaching levels, the majority of the participants viewed their low English speaking ability and large classes as major constraints on the implementation of the MEST-initiated reform, and as the teaching level went up, they pointed at the washback effect of the CSAT as one of the major constraints on the implementation of the reform. This variation explains particularly well the mismatch between the HT group’s beliefs and practices as well as the internal conflict in the HT group’s beliefs as observed in the ranking question.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study investigated what Korean EFL teachers of three different levels believed about English language education and how their beliefs interacted with their perceptions of educational reform and teaching practices. The results of the survey can be summarized into the following three major findings. First, although the participants’ beliefs were largely based on the communication-oriented approach with emphasis on fluency, employment of interactive and group activities, and student-centered teaching, there was a
group variation. The results from the first two parts of the Likert-scale items indicate that the ET group believed in COA more strongly than the other two groups, and the results from the ranking question reveal an internal conflict in the HT group’s beliefs. This group difference can be interpreted as symptomatic of a transition stage through which English language education in Korea has been passing. The participants as a whole had been changing toward a more communicative approach to language teaching, while still leaving traces of the grammar-focused, reading-based approach (among the high school teacher participants in particular). In this sense, the MEST’s reform efforts have been successful, at least partially if not fully. COA promoted by the MEST has become the dominant force in EFL education in Korea.

Second, a significant group difference existed in the teaching practices reported by the participants. The teaching practices reported by the ET group were COA-oriented, those by the HT group were GRA-oriented, and those by the MT group came between the two, forming some kind of continuum from COA at the elementary school to GRA at the high school. As a result, the ET group’s beliefs were consistent with their teaching practices but the HT group’s beliefs, which were COA-oriented, did not match their teaching practices, which were largely GRA-oriented.

Third, the majority of the participants reported that they were familiar with the Korea MEST’s efforts to reform English language education. At the same time, they suggested that their low English proficiency (speaking ability in particular) and large classes were constraints on their attempts to implement the reform. Moreover, the ET group pointed to the lack of opportunities to learn diverse teaching methods, while the HT group was concerned with the washback effect of the CSAT.

This concern of the HT group with the washback effect of the CSAT explains the mismatch between the HT group’s beliefs and practices as well as the internal conflict in the HT group’s beliefs as observed in the ranking question. Pressure from the test has been documented and commonly cited as a detriment to the implementation of a more communicative approach (Gorsuch, 2000; Hiramatsu, 2005; Sakui, 2004). As Shohamy (2005) points out, teachers are often forced to “teach to the test” (p. 107). This “teaching to the test” explains particularly well the mismatch between this study’s high school teachers’ reported beliefs in the primacy of COA-oriented teaching and their GRA-based teaching practice. They put their COA-oriented beliefs on hold, complied with the demands of the CSAT in order to maximize their students’ scores on the test, and drew on GRA-based teaching practices. Viewed from a slightly different angle, the mismatch (and other gaps observed in the MT group’s beliefs and practices) can be viewed as a result of the participants’ strategic adjustments in the face of the great schism between the demands of MEST-initiated reform and the realities of on-site English language education. In other words, the mismatch can be viewed as an example of what Johnson (2009) calls “inner
contradictions” (p. 79). Drawing upon activity theory, Johnson argues that L2 teaching is not neutral but embedded in “the broader social, historical, political, and ideological practices that constitute L2 teachers’ professional world” (p. 93). These practices shape “macro-structures” such as educational reform policies and high-stakes tests (p. 78). Inner contradictions often result from the “clash” between macro-structures and L2 teachers’ teaching activities. According to one of the participants in the study of Sakui (2004), the clash and resulting inner contradictions make teachers to use the strategy of “wearing two pairs of shoes,” one for tests and the other, for communication (p. 158). Similarly, Korean EFL (HT) teachers’ strategic adjustment makes them rely on two contrasting teaching practices, and this adjustment often results in a mismatch between their beliefs and practices.

The results and findings of this study reveal complex relationships that are formed between the teacher participants’ beliefs, practices, and the realities of English language education in Korea. The findings evoke implications for teacher education programs in Korea. Tedick (2005) insists that “contextual factors are fundamental to second language teacher education” (p. 97). In Korea, the MEST-initiated reform represents a set of contextual factors that EFL teacher education programs have to address. Moreover, according to Johnson (2009), uncovering and resolving inner contradictions is part of L2 teacher education’s responsibility. Therefore, unless they strongly opposes to the reform, Korean EFL teacher education programs are responsible for uncovering and resolving the conflicts between what the reform demands and what teachers practice in the classroom. To put it differently, Korean EFL teacher education programs must play a role of the mediator between teachers and the MEST’s reform efforts. One way to play the role is to provide pre- and in-service EFL teachers with opportunities to reflect on the beliefs they hold, teaching practices they employ, and perceptions they have toward reform, examine whether there is any conflicts or mismatches between them, and, if any, find solutions. Another more obvious way to act as a mediator is to pay more attention to what pre- and in-service teachers want and need in order to prepare them for the demands of the reform. For example, most of the participants in this study, regardless of teaching levels, listed their (perceived) low English proficiency as one of the major interfering factors with their attempts to implement the MEST-initiated reform. Therefore, Korean EFL teacher education programs need to provide more courses that are specifically designed not only to improve teachers’ English communication skills but also to teach them ways to lead classes in English. To take another example, the ETs desire to learn language teaching theories and methods. Because they are not usually English majors, they may feel uncomfortable when they are in the situation to teach English. This suggests that EFL teacher education programs must attend to different needs held by teachers teaching at different teaching levels and provide more finely tuned curricular and/or courses.
What is clear at the moment is that COA, which has been vigorously promoted by the MEST, has taken root in English language education in Korea, and Korean EFL teacher education programs and specialists working within the programs have to pay much more and closer attention to what EFL teachers believe, do, and want.

Any research is inevitably limited by various constraints. This study is no exception. Two limitations must be mentioned. One limitation is related to the fact that recruiting Korean EFL teachers at individual schools was extremely difficult. A majority of the participants were thus recruited from teachers who were attending in-service teacher education programs. This group of teachers could be different from average Korean EFL teachers in that the former might be more ready to learn about and accept the MEST-initiated reforms than the latter. Therefore, surveying average Korean EFL teachers recruited from on-sites (rather than from the in-service teacher education programs) might have produced somewhat different results. Another possible limitation of this study concerns the data collection technique. Some concerns have been raised about the data collection technique employed in this study, survey with a questionnaire. Among them is a concern that what people believe and how they act are often different from their related survey responses (Dömyei, 2007). In other words, the beliefs and practices articulated by the participants in their responses to the questionnaire might have been different from the beliefs or practices they “actually” held or did. One way to check the consistency between these two contrasting entities is employing two more data collection techniques, interview and classroom observation. The additional use of these two techniques would further strengthen the validity of this study’s findings.

The study also points to areas that deserve further research attention. It was noticed that the ET group tended to be more COA-oriented than the MT group or the HT group, and the three groups were different in terms of age, sex ratio, and teaching experience. The impact of some of the factors seems relevant in this study. Further research on these factors would serve as significant complements to the present study.

REFERENCES


World Englishes, 22(1), 55-66.


APPENDIX

Questionnaire for the Survey

Section A: Please respond to the following questions either by putting X or writing a numeral in an appropriate slot.

1. Gender: male _____ female _____
2. Age: ______
3. How many years have you been teaching English? ________ years
4. Which educational level are you teaching English?
   elementary school ______ middle school ______ high school ______
5. Address of the school in which you teach (please write briefly like the following example).
   (Example) Suseong-gu, Daegu City

Section B: Please read each sentence and then decide if you: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) agree, and 4) strongly agree. For example, if you strongly disagree with what the following sentence means, you circle the numeral 1 as the example shows. There is no right or wrong answer. We are simply interested in your thoughts or opinions.
(Example)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Koreans must learn Chinese.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The goal of English language education should be preparing students to communicate with foreigners in English.  

2. Fluency should be emphasized in EFL education.  

3. Successful communication should be a goal in English language learning.  

4. The goal of English language education should be preparing students to read passages in English and translate them into their native language effectively.  

5. Accuracy should be emphasized in EFL education.  

6. Reading comprehension ability is more important than speaking ability in learning English.  

7. Practicing English in communicative activities is essential to eventual mastery of English.  

8. It is important to practice English in real-life-like situations in the classroom.  

9. Spoken communication skills (e.g., speaking, listening) are more important than written communication skills (e.g., reading, writing).  

10. Practicing grammar patterns is an important part of English language learning in the classroom.  

11. The more English grammar rules a student learns, the better she is at speaking English.  

12. The more words a student memorizes, the better she is at speaking English.  

13. English language education must meet students’ needs.  

14. Teachers need to pay attention to students’ interests.  

15. English language education must focus on what teachers think students have to learn.  

16. Teachers need to have a firm control over the entire classroom.  

17. Pair and small group activities are important for students to improve their English.  

18. Students can improve their English proficiency by speaking in English with their classmates in the classroom.
19. It is important to repeat and practice in learning English language.

   1  2  3  4

20. Students can improve English proficiency through memorization of set phrases.

   1  2  3  4

21. English language education should begin in the primary school or earlier.

   1  2  3  4

22. The earlier students start learning English, the better their pronunciation is.

   1  2  3  4

23. It is easier for children than adult to learn English.

   1  2  3  4

24. Teaching English in English is needed in an EFL context.

   1  2  3  4

25. English input spoken by teachers is important for improving students’ English proficiency, especially listening and speaking skills.

   1  2  3  4

26. Conducting classes in English helps students improve their English proficiency.

   1  2  3  4

Section C: Rank (from 1 to 7) the following skills and areas according to your view of their usefulness in learning English language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>grammar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pronunciation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section D: Please respond to the following questions.

1. What methods are you using in your classroom teaching? List as many as you want.

2. How much do you know about the Ministry of Education-initiated reform in English language education? Describe the main goal of the reform and write down reform-related policies or measures you know of.

3. List things that you think most interfere with your attempts/intentions to implement the Ministry of Education-initiated reform.

   Applicable Level: All levels
   Key words: Korean EFL teachers, beliefs, teaching practices, perceptions, reform, constraints
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