Analyzing the Effects of Collaborative Action Research from the Teacher Identity Perspective

Hyoshin Lee
(Institute of Education, University of London)


This study aims to examine how collaborative action research has contributed to a teacher’s professional development. It built a framework from the teacher identity perspective, aimed at deriving further insight into the effects of collaborative action research as a professional development program. It is a case study of a Korean primary school English teacher who conducted collaborative action research to improve the quality of teaching English writing. The qualitative data were collected from teaching logs, written accounts and semi-structured interviews, then analysed. The study found that the teacher experienced growth in teacher identity based on his capacity building through collaborative action research. The factors affecting the growth of teacher identity are positive attitudes to address vulnerability in teaching English, participation in the collaborative action research, continuous reflection and establishing ownership during the research. Theoretically, this study suggests the development of teacher identity perspective and its application to design, execute and evaluate teacher education programs for in-depth understanding. Practically, it provides implications for English teacher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the awareness of the importance of teacher roles in English language education, attention has been paid to English language teacher education, particularly in many EFL countries where most of the teachers are non-native English speaking teachers. The Korean government, which has also been faced with a need for providing well-qualified English language teachers, has invested huge amount of money and time in in-service teacher education programs (MEST, 2008). As a result, a variety of language teacher education programs have been provided by both the public and private education sectors.
Recently, the quality of teacher education programs has been on the policy agenda (Hyo-shin Lee, 2007; Ji-hyeon Jeon & Jee-yon Paek, 2009). Given this context, researchers in Korea have begun to pay attention to the effects of teacher education programs (Kyung-suk Chang, 2007; Jae-hyuk Kim, 2001; Hyo-shin Lee, 2007; Shin & Kellogg, 2007; So-young Yang, 2009).

This issue is closely related to my personal and professional experience as a schoolteacher and teacher educator. While working as a university lecturer and teacher educator in a master course for English language teachers, I raised the question of why theory-based teacher education courses in English language teaching hardly provide both teacher educators and trainee teachers with opportunities to experience ‘real change’ in terms of improving their competency and gaining confidence in their practices. As a result, I conducted the research addressing Korean English teacher development through peer collaboration. It was found that there was a gap between teachers’ attitudes and behavior with regard to action research for professional development (Hyo-shin Lee, 2003). Korean teachers showed positive attitudes towards their continuous professional development through action research. However, they were reluctant to take part in it in reality due to difficulties such as extra workload, time-consumption and inadequate expertise (Hyo-shin Lee, 2007). Bearing this in mind, I conducted collaborative action research with Mr. Kim, one of my students in a master course, in an attempt to explore the process through which an experienced teacher learned how to develop his professionalism. I also attempted to explore my own professional learning as a teacher educator.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the collaborative action research by employing a teacher identity perspective to derive implications for teacher education. More specifically, my aim is to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the key feature of teacher identity at each stage (before, during and after collaborative action research) in light of the effects of collaborative action research on the Korean primary school English teacher?
2. What factors have influenced the effects of collaborative action research?
3. What are the implications of the current study for English teacher education?

To do this, I employed a case study of Mr. Kim, who was a primary school teacher with 16 years of experience. I attempted to examine Mr. Kim’s story about his learning experience and understand his change by analyzing his spoken and written accounts and his teaching logs as main data sources. This case study, which is mainly based on one person’s memory and memoir, is highly contextualized. Despite its innate limits to make it over-generalized, it is certainly expected to exemplify a case in which there is a real story about how a classroom teacher who was vulnerable in his professional identity as an EFL
teacher gained confidence, resulting in teacher identity development. I built an analytical framework to analyze the effects of the collaborative action research from the teacher identity perspective based on the literature review of collaborative action research for teacher development and teacher’s professional identity. The effects of collaborative action research were analyzed, and findings were interpreted considering the context. It ends with implications of the current study for English teacher education.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Collaborative Action Research for Teacher Development

English language teaching has been regarded as an international channel of communication, especially with the increase of the pressure to communicate in the so-called ‘age of communication’ (Wallace, 1991). The expansion of language teaching has led to the increase in demand for language teacher development. It specifically focuses on the whole process of reflection, examination and change that can lead to doing a better job and to personal and professional growth, and addresses long-term needs (Freeman, 1989; Mann, 2005). The recognition of a teacher as a professional who can do something by and for themselves has close relation to employing collaborative action research as a teacher development approach in ESL context (Burns, 1999). In the discourse of English language teacher development, action research has become popular as an effective way of teacher learning and change (Burns, 2005; Nunan, 1997; Wallace; 1999).

Action research focuses on action and research. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) state that the linking of the term ‘action’ and ‘research’ highlights its methodological features such as examining ideas in practice as a means of improvement and increasing knowledge about teaching and learning. As Nunan (1997) points out, action research represents a particular attitude of a teacher which his or her critical reflection on ideas engages in, ‘the informed application and experimentation of ideas in practice, and the critical evaluation of the outcomes of such application’. To synthesize its definition by writers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982; Nunan, 1997), action research in education can be defined as ‘teacher-initiated investigation which seeks to increase knowledge about teaching and learning and improve classroom practice’.

Burns (2005) outlines that serious empirical research in the form of action research in the field of language teaching emerged from the late 1980s. Advocates of ‘teacher as a researcher’ (e.g. Allwright & Baily, 1991; Nunan, 1989; Wallace, 1999) highlight the advantages of action research: bridging the gap between research bodies and the teaching profession through teachers’ involvement, encouraging teachers to research orientation to
their classroom, and increasing teacher empowerment. By contrast, some writers show reservations due to teachers’ role in research and other inhibiting factors. Brumfit and Mitchell (1989) argue that teachers can have difficulty in meeting the tradition of educational research. Wallace (1999) details inhibiting factors originating from both people and organizations such as; work pressure, lack of motivation or reward of professional development, natural diffidence and professional insecurity.

Action research has been conducted for a variety of aims such as; problem solving, the investigation of curriculum change or innovation, filling the gap between academic research findings and practical application, and facilitating the professional development of reflective teachers. Amongst them, emphasis has been placed on action research as a means of strengthening teacher professional development (Burns, 2005).

The need of collaboration in teacher education has emerged from the challenge to teacher development as an individual work. Roberts (1998) argues that teachers’ learning needs to be explained beyond personal cognitive process, and Ur (1996) asserts that teachers’ learning should be understood within the context of teachers having to spend most of their lives in being educated and educating. Moreover, Roberts argues that rapid changes are required to overcome the possible subjectivity in teachers’ decision-making processes and the danger of being short-sighted or narrow-minded, and Hargreaves (1994) claims that it cannot find a solution to the problems. These arguments result in the employment of collaboration in teacher development. Collaboration means sharing with and opening to outsiders and is required at multidimensional levels. The perspective of teachers as social learners seems consistent with the idea of cooperative development as a tool for second language teacher development advocated by a number of experts (Little, 1990; Smyth, 1991).

Emphasis on collaboration in teacher education has accelerated the development of collaborative action research. It is based on the recognition that one of the most effective ways of conducting teacher-initiated investigation in the context of action research is through collaboration. Collaboration can be with students, colleagues in the same institution or outside the institution, colleagues with a different area of expertise including teacher educators and full-time researchers, and colleagues in other disciplines (Wallace, 1999). Smyth (1991) notes that the teachers’ capacity to reflect is achieved through the development of ‘collaborative alliances’, enriching the sense of feasibility and possibility, and transforming as well as understanding those realities. According to Little (1990), collaboration as joint work among colleagues means the sharing of ideas and responsibility for their work and one of the potential benefits is that teachers may gain moral support. Rosenholtz (1991) indicates that collaboration can increase diversity of good teaching and teacher confidence, which might reduce uncertainty. Burns (2005) maintains that collaborative action research can be more empowering than action research conducted
individually by providing strong framework for the whole school change. Wallace (1999) maintains that collaborative action research provides three advantages in terms of depth and coverage, validity and reliability, and motivation despite potential disadvantages including demands of professional relationships.

Another issue relating to action research aimed at enhancing teacher development is reflection. Attention has been increasingly paid to reflective teaching since the 1980s, particularly since Schön (1983) introduced the significance of reflection in developing teacher’s knowledge about what to teach and how to teach more effectively. Definition of reflection or reflective teaching abounds. Kyriacou (1994) views reflective teaching as an approach to teaching in which teachers regularly think about and evaluate their own practice in a systematic way with a view to developing and further improving their classroom practice. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) refer to reflection as a professional development strategy that enables professionals to hold ‘opportunities to explore, articulate, and represent their own ideas and knowledge’. On the other hand, Pollard (2005) presents characteristics of reflective teaching instead of defining it. Key characteristics are the focus on aims and consequences as well as means and technical efficiency; application of cyclical process in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously; teachers’ attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness; teachers’ judgment informed by evidence-based enquiry and insights from other research; and enhanced teacher development through collaboration with colleagues. Action research encompasses these characteristics and teachers who conduct action research can improve their knowledge and understanding of classroom practice (Farrell, 2007).

2. Teachers’ Professional Identity

As teachers’ professional identity has been regarded as a critical component in teachers’ professional development and in the socio-cultural and sociopolitical dimensions of teaching (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005), it has emerged as a separate research area in education research (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Interest in professional identity is based on the recognition that a sense of professional identity influences teachers’ self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006), and therefore is an important factor for an effective teacher.

Due to its complex concept with diverse characteristics, however, teacher identity is defined differently according to research aims (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Lasky (2005) indicates that teacher identity is ‘how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others.’ Focusing on professional identity, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) describe it in terms of the teacher as a subject matter expert, the teacher as a pedagogical
experts, and the teacher as a didactical expert. Subject matter expertise includes ability to transform knowledge into changeable forms which enables teachers to develop programs and diagnose students’ understandings adequately as well as the traditional ability to transmit knowledge (Bennet & Carré, 1993; Shulman, 1987). Pedagogical expertise encompasses such personal and professional aspects as understanding student mind and communication skills (Beijaard, 1995). It also includes teachers’ awareness of many norms and values involved in their interactions and educational choices with students. Finally, didactical expertise is related to the shift of teacher role from the traditional teacher-centered conceptions of teaching to more student-oriented ones with greater emphasis on learning than teaching. This shift entails teachers initiating, guiding and influencing students, and gradually transfers the learning process from teachers to students.

Beijaard et al. (2004) identify four characteristics of professional identity after examining relevant literature. They determined that teacher identity is an ongoing process in which teachers continue to interpret and re-interpret their experiences, involves both person and context, comprises several sub-identities that are balanced to avoid conflict across them, and finally encompasses the concept of agency, meaning the active role in the process of professional development in accordance with teachers’ goals.

As is shown above, teacher identity is dynamic and changes over time. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) underpin that developing an identity as a teacher contributes to teachers’ commitment of their work and forming their disposition in terms of their efforts to find professional development opportunities. It is acknowledged that shift in teacher identity is an important part of becoming a better teacher. Specifically, relationships with colleagues, people and learners are important factors of teacher identity shift (Johnston, 2003). However, little attention has been paid to applying shift in teacher identity to teacher education programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

The factors which influence the development of teacher identity include factors internal to the individual such as emotion (van Veen & Sleegers, 2006) and external to individual such as experiences in particular contexts (Flores & Day, 2006). There are two types of emotion. While positive emotions include love and care, job satisfaction and joy, pride and pleasure in students’ progress, negative emotions emerge when their trust and long held principles are challenged (Flores & Day, 2006). Emotion is related to teacher’s vulnerability. It is caused by the threat to professional identity and moral integrity by policy changes or people (Kelchtermans, 1996). Flores and Day (2006) present four key factors which affect teacher identity. They are pre-teaching identity, context of teaching, past influences and reshaped identity.
3. Analytical Framework

This study employed the concept of teacher identity in developing an analytical lens in order to examine the processes and the outcomes of English language teacher development through collaborative action research. The notion of teacher identity in this study focused on professional dimension of self rather than personal. Therefore, the teacher identity lens investigated Mr. Kim’s growth of expertise in subject matter, pedagogy and didactical aspect. In addition, the analytical framework encompasses the features of continuous shifts, caused by the collaborative action research as a means for teacher development.

The shift in teacher identity is divided into three phases. Key elements of teacher identity in each phase were identified and factors which influenced the features of teacher identity were analysed. Phase 1 is concerned with the period before collaborative action research. Mr. Kim suffered from vulnerability as an EFL teacher. The influence of initial teacher training and biography, and in-service teacher education programs was analyzed. In phase 2, which is concerned with the period while collaborative action research was conducted, Mr. Kim experienced growth in his professional identity. The process and outcomes of the collaborative action research were analysed in terms of the influence of initiating the collaborative action research, reflection, collaboration and conducting action research. In phase 3, which is concerned with the period after collaborative action research, the sustainability of the effects of the change in teacher identity through the collaborative action research were examined.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Context

1) Participant: Mr. Kim

‘Mr. Kim’ was a primary school teacher with 16 years of experience and was in charge of class 2 of the 6th grade in S primary school in Seoul. The class had regular English lessons twice a week. Most of the students were interested in learning English and went to private English language institutes after school. He started becoming interested in English teaching since he had observed young learners learning English in a kindergarten in 1990. He was enthusiastic about developing himself as a professional and took a Master’s course. In addition, he was an active learner who was involved in a variety of teacher training programs provided by the government, universities and other private teacher training centres.
2) The Researcher

At the time of the study, I was a part-time lecturer at a university and teaching ‘Teaching Reading and Writing to Young Learners’ and ‘Research Methodology in English Language Teaching.’ Two thirds of the students in my course were primary school teachers who wanted to improve their teaching competence as English language teachers in primary schools. Interest in my own professional development led me to study an English language teacher development while doing a PhD in England. Since returning to a high school, as an expert in English language teacher development and a classroom teacher, I expanded my practical knowledge by being involved in various school-based research.

3) A Process of Collaborative Action Research

Mr. Kim and I met in March 2005 when Mr. Kim enrolled in my class ‘Teaching Reading and Writing to Young Learners.’ After finishing the class, he wanted to teach English writing to his primary students through co-operative work, in which students work together to do the tasks. I was interested in the process of learning English writing through co-operative work, and how classroom teachers change through classroom research. Having shared common interest in the issue on teaching English writing to young learners using a co-operative approach, we implemented the collaborative action research from October 2005 to April 2006. We decided to adopt collaborative action research, in which we tried to solve the problems through the reflective cyclical process in a collaborative way.

The collaborative action research was carried out in three phases with each phase involving four input lessons. Mr. Kim video-recorded all the lessons and I observed the lessons as a co-researcher. At the end of each lesson, Mr. Kim and I discussed the lessons and particular focus was placed on teaching English writing through co-operative learning. Additional data were collected through interviews with students and through questionnaires. We analysed the data in a collaborative way and at workshops with my master course students. The findings of the research in each phase were reflected in the next phase.

2. Data Collection

The main data behind the paper were collected through three main sources aiming at understanding how Mr. Kim conducted the collaborative action research with an outside expert and what opinion he held after the research. Mr. Kim’s reflective thinking was
written in his journals during the collaborative action research from October 2005 to April 2006. In April 2008, I asked him to re-story with his written accounts. In addition, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with Mr. Kim in May 2008. All the data were originally collected in Korean and translated into English.

The first source of data is Mr. Kim’s teaching logs. They were written from October 2005 to April 2006, while collaborative action research was conducted. He wrote logs with his brief reflections about the meetings and lessons. These written reflections were collected when we finished the research to see how he was getting involved in the process of conducting collaborative action research with a teacher educator.

The second source of data is re-storying, gathered in April 2008. I employed the technique of ‘re-storying’ for constructing the narrative accounts in order to understand this cognitive process in the research and the impacts of his past experiences on the current beliefs and daily lives. Re-storying refers to the storied data gathered from the retrospective and introspective memories and memoirs. I identified key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot, and scene) from the data and rewrote the story to place it in a chronological sequence (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The autobiographical accounts mainly relying on memories and memoirs may be seen as ‘something less than research’ (Benson, 2004, p.13). However, based on an assumption that qualitative research seeks answers stressing how social experience creates and gives meaning of everyday life, I attempted to analyze the narrative data. The data were gathered based on the belief that memories and memoirs retain a somewhat equivocal status as research and are used in the English language teacher development literature (Johnson & Golombeck, 2002).

The third source is the data from an in-depth semi-structured interview with Mr. Kim which was conducted in May 2008. The interviews were carried out after gathering his written narrative accounts in order to gain more specific ideas of his current understanding of his experience of collaborative action research conducted two years ago.

The latter two methods were undertaken with the expectation of drawing his awareness of what he did two years ago and what he did two years later. Despite the two year gap, these methods were expected to have the advantage for Mr. Kim to position his experience of the collaborative action research in his teaching career. This enabled me to analyze the data from the teacher identity perspective.

3. Data Analysis

Throughout qualitative data, researchers keep track of emerging themes, read through their field notes and develop concepts and propositions for understanding the data. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest strategies for data analysis which are composed of three phases: identifying themes and developing concepts and propositions, data coding and
understanding; and situating the findings.

The first phase is an ongoing discovery phase which encompasses identifying themes and developing concepts and propositions. In this study, it was an on-going process throughout the research to figure out the picture of what Mr. Kim had experienced and what had happened to him. It is worth noting that the concept of teacher identity as an analytical lens was not developed until all the data were gathered and examined holistically. It has contributed to understanding the effects of collaborative action research in a different way.

The second phase, which occurs after the data have been collected, is concerned with coding the data and refining understanding of the subject matter. The collected data were transcribed in a selective way. Important comments were selected and transcribed while I was listening to the recordings and reading the logs repeatedly. The analytical framework was used for selecting comments. At first, the key teacher identity feature at each stage was identified and relevant data were selected. Then the factors influencing the features were identified and relevant comments were selected. Finally, the relationship between the comments was analyzed. The draft was reviewed by two education researchers and revised by reflecting their comments. A selective transcription approach has been chosen considering that it reduces the time for the work itself and the time spent reading transcripts later (Munn & Derever, 1995). Moreover, taking into account the fact that the interview data written in Korean had to be translated into English, the transcription of the whole data appears very time-consuming and undesirable in that it could cause misinterpretation of the raw data.

The final phase is concerned with researcher’s attempts to situate the findings. This means the researcher’s attempt to understand the data in the context in which they were collected. In this study, I made efforts to place the findings in the context in which the collaborative action research was conducted. My experience of working as a Korean non-native English teacher in public schools helped me to further understand the context.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data are presented in three phases according to influences of collaborative action research on the development of teacher identity based on the analytical framework. They are phase 1: before collaborative action research in which teacher vulnerability is examined, phase 2: during collaborative action research in which the impact of collaborative action research on the teacher identity is investigated, and phase 3: after collaborative action research in which how to sustain the sense of identity development is explored. Each phase will comprise the key feature of teacher identity, the influencing
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factors which form the particular aspect of teacher identity in the phase and discussion.

1. Before Collaborative Action Research

1) Teacher Identity: Teacher Vulnerability

Although he has 16 years of teaching experience as a primary school teacher, he felt vulnerable when he taught English. His vulnerability was based on the lack of confidence in teaching English and low command of language competence.

(1) Lack of Confidence in Teaching English

For Mr. Kim, teaching English was stressful and burdensome. The following episode illustrates this:

There was a girl who was very good at English in my class… One day, she asked me to proofread her essay. I was very surprised with her English ability. At the same time, I felt burdensome about how I was going to guide English writing. Also, I felt frustrated in my teaching. I did not know how to guide English writing effectively. (from written accounts in April, 2008)

Although this episode was about English writing, he felt burdensome and stressful when teaching English. Despite his 16 years of teaching experience, of which 8 year experience of English teaching, and on-going efforts to be a better language teacher, he was still struggling with teaching and learning English.

I was aware that writing was an essential language skill in learning English, but I could not think of any effective way to teach it in class where there were so many different levels of students. Although I had learned how to teach English writing in a teacher training centre, I was not confident to apply it to my class and no contents were available to use in the class from the training resources. (from written accounts in April 2008)

(2) Low Command of Language Competence

Although the government has invested in in-service education for primary English teachers, the quality of English teaching is regarded as low. It was reported that as of 2006 16,171 (49.8%) English teachers out of 32,482 teachers who taught English at primary and
secondary schools were able to teach English in English and that 7,457 (23%) English teachers were teaching English in English (MOEHRD, 2006). In particular, the current ELT policy, in which teachers are encouraged to teach English using only English (MEST, 2008), has caused much pressure on them. Korean English teachers in both primary and secondary schools have shown much concern about their low command of English language competence (Hyo-shin Lee, 2007; Un-kyoung Maeng, 2009). Mr. Kim showed his concern about his English competence, particularly his oral fluency.

… I am very interested in teaching English. I have taken English lessons from private language institutes and many teacher training programs provided by teacher training centers. I have also participated in English Camp as an instructor several times. … I think I have spent lots of time in learning English and learning how to teach English effectively, but I frequently feel frustrated. I can manage to teach English, though it is not perfect. But the problem is my English. I think speaking is the main problem. (from interview data in May 2008)

2) Influencing Factors

(1) Introduction of English teaching in primary schools in 1997 and Mr. Kim’s biography

English education in Korean primary schools has a relatively short history, compared to secondary education which started in 1950s. When English as a formal subject was introduced in 1997, one of the main concerns among educators was the lack of qualified teachers who could teach English in primary schools. It was in 1995 that the Korean government started to provide in-service teacher training programs, where the main focus was placed on English language improvement for the teachers who had very low language competence and had hardly been taught how to teach English in any pre-service courses.

Like most middle aged Korean primary school teachers, Mr. Kim, who became a primary school teacher in 1991 and now is 43 years old, did not learn about English language teaching at his initial teacher training.

When English became more important in primary education, I thought I should learn English. Actually I liked English when I was a high school student. But I was from a very small village and you may know that it was impossible to meet any foreigners, even in the town. What I did all the time was to remember English words and grammars for tests… At my college, I rarely studied English because,
you know, at that time, English was not taught in any primary schools. I took only one or two English lessons, which was not very different from what I learned from my high school, and it was useless. (from interview data in May 2008)

(2) In-service Teacher Education

Mr. Kim is a non-native English speaking teacher with 16 years of experience in Korean primary schools and has made a great amount of effort to provide quality English teaching for his young learners as well as to seek opportunities for professional development. His efforts include participation in school projects for teaching and learning improvement, teacher education courses provided by teacher development centers, and a master course. However, despite his efforts, he was confident in neither command of English competence nor teaching methodology.

I have taken many training programs provided by the teacher training centers. I also studied a master course at the university. I have learned a variety of information regarding English language teaching but it was not easy to apply into my classroom. I was not sure what I should do. (from interview data in May 2008)

3) Discussion

The fact that Mr. Kim had to teach English although he had not learned English teaching at his initial teacher education program played an important role in his low confidence in teaching English along with his English fluency. The increasing demand for quality English teaching makes English teachers feel stressed in Korea. The introduction of English teaching at Korean primary schools in 1997 made teachers who had to teach English feeling vulnerable in regards to their teacher identity as EFL teachers. Mr. Kim took pride in himself as a professional primary school teacher. However, he had low confidence in teaching English. A variety of in-service teacher education programs failed in giving him confidence.

The issue on the professional identity of non-native English teachers, particularly regarding their relatively low language competence compared to native English speaking teachers, has been raised by many educators (Demirezen, 2007). Despite research findings which indicate some advantages of teaching EFL as a non-native English speaking teacher (Shin & Kellogg, 2007), it is found that many of non-native English speaking teachers tend to show ‘impostor syndrome’, which has led to weakening their professional identity (Bernat, 2008).
Like Mr. Kim, most of the Korean primary English teachers who had not learned how to teach in initial training courses experienced vulnerability by the introduction of English language teaching in 1997. Lasky (2005) refers to teacher’s vulnerability as a fluid state of being that can be affected by people’s perception of the present situation and with crucial incidents causing a change in the teacher’s existing state. Vulnerability can function differently according to the people who handle the situation. A sense of vulnerability from an experience of openness and trust enables people to open themselves, facilitating learning, trust building and collaboration. By contrast, a sense of vulnerability from the feeling of powerlessness forces people to close themselves, resulting in inhibiting learning, trust building and collaboration. The latter is related to the negative effect of vulnerability. Kelchtermans (2005) defines teachers’ professional vulnerability as the teachers’ job experiences in which they feel powerless by others and lose ‘control of the processes and tasks they felt responsible for as teachers’.

2. During Collaborative Action Research

When Mr. Kim was faced with vulnerability, he sought to address it. He started collaborative action research with me. At the time I was a lecturer in a postgraduate course. This section is the report on his growth of teacher identity through collaborative action research.

1) Teacher Identity: Growth

Factors causing his vulnerability are mainly related to English teaching. As Beijaard et al. (2004) defines, Mr. Kim’s teacher vulnerability originated from the threat to teacher identity in terms of a teacher as an expert in subject matter, pedagogy and didactic aspect. As I conducted collaborative action research with Mr. Kim, it was observed that this part of teacher identity had improved. The following indicates his growth of subject matter expertise.

I started this research with the idea that teaching writing through cooperative learning would be as effective as other subjects or activities…. When employing the existing groups at the beginning of research, students’ collaboration was not achieved successfully due to the level difference among students and the lack of preparation for interactive writing activities…. It took some time to realize that it was the key for a successful class to prepare English writing activities reflecting different levels of students. To get over the individual differences of students and to encourage them to help each other in writing activities, groups were divided by
level. In addition, I reorganized the lesson plans from the basic to the advanced steps. As a result, students showed more interest and confidence. (from written accounts in April 2008)

A teacher as a pedagogical expert entails the understanding students’ mind, communication skills and the problems students have. Mr. Kim states that he understood and developed his communication skills while conducting collaborative action research.

… I realized that open-minded communication enriched the quality of study. The interviews with students provided the opportunity to promote understanding between teacher and students as well as among students. Through the interviews, students had the chance of listening to the reason why some students did not participate in the collaboration learning. (from written accounts in April 2008)

He made use of conducting action research as an opportunity to improve his expertise as a teacher researcher. It was seen that he developed not only his skills as a researcher but also his awareness of being an independent teacher and learner, which promoted the growth of his teacher identity.

I could discover new solutions and find other aspects of my study through the meeting with Dr. Lee. Recording classes on videotapes functions as a valuable resource, not only by helping observe students in class, but also by making me self-examine my way of teaching. Upon reviewing a class recorded on video, I could figure out the outline of the writing activity and the overall picture of students. … One of the lessons I learned through this collaborative action research is that the key to unlock the problems was in the hands of the teacher, me. (from written accounts in April 2008)

It was very interesting to observe all his changes in a daily classroom and the process in which he gained confidence through self-observation and interviews with students. It was an unforgettable moment when he said ‘Now, I can see a change!’. He became aware of himself as an expert in this highly contextualized research and showed his personal and professional growth by planning, observing, listening to his learners, colleagues and an outside co-worker.

2) Influencing Factors

(1) Initiating collaborative action research
Despite his lack of confidence in both language and teaching competence, Mr. Kim did not want to stay in the unsatisfied status but rather kept trying to solve the problems that he was faced with in his daily classrooms and developed his professional ability.

While constantly concerned about this, I took a teaching writing course in the third semester of my graduate school. … In the process, an idea that English writing through co-operative learning would be effective occurred to me. This idea was based on my daily teaching strategy in a large classroom. So I decided to teach English writing to my young students through co-operative learning and do some research on it. (from written accounts in April 2008)

However, he felt uncertain of not only himself as a professional teacher but also as a classroom researcher.

However, it was not easy to research on English writing on my own, although I had an experience of doing classroom research before. First of all, I was not sure of the way I taught and wanted to know whether my way of doing it is right or not and how to do classroom research. (from written accounts in April 2008)

He also pointed out the difficulty of doing research on his classroom activities. This indicates the conflict between positive attitudes toward doing action research for their professional development and the low participation in reality (Hyo-shin Lee, 2007).

I decided to teach English writing to my young students through co-operative learning and do some research on it. However, it was not easy to research on English writing by myself… (from written accounts in April 2008)

This shows his positive response to teacher vulnerability. While he was aware of the necessity of classroom research to solve the problems, I suggested action research to him.

While talking about my concern about English writing with Dr. Lee, she suggested that we do an action research together. I thought it was a good opportunity to analyze various aspects observed in the process of teacher-student learning and to find effective ways in cooperation with an expert in doing this kind of school research. (from written accounts in April 2008)

His positive attitudes to address his vulnerability provided him with an opportunity to conduct collaborative action research.
(2) Reflection

As if doing a puzzle, I felt like completing it in different ways, by trying various solutions. I felt that I was approaching nearer to the answer not by reading the correct answer but by making mistakes over and over. (from written accounts in April 2008)

Reflection in the collaborative action research acted as a catalyst for Mr. Kim’s learning and changed his teaching practice. Mr. Kim with his young learners was continuously recalled, rethought and reconstructed by continuously raising questions of his practice and how to improve it, as shown below.

Today’s lesson was focused on students’ writing activity but I think more interactive activity should be given, rather than giving just a writing worksheet. I need to know their levels to prepare for a more interactive lesson in the next lesson. And what kind of feedback should I give for effective writing activities? (from teaching log on 8, November, 2005)

As a whole, I think the activities seemed to work on mainly strong students. Is there any way to let all the students participate in the lesson? I think I need a clearer understanding of the concept of co-operative learning. I wonder what kind of co-operative learning activities are proper for my students. I need to read something about it. (from teaching log on 11, November, 2005)

(3) Collaboration

While doing collaborative action research between a classroom teacher and outside teacher educator, the issue concerning with their roles was raised. It was interesting to observe that Mr. Kim’s attitudes towards the role of his tutor had shifted from a view of a tutor to that of a co-worker. At first, Mr. Kim seemed to expect the outside teacher educator to provide the solution but I intentionally attempted not to do so. I believed that Mr. Kim had already been an expert in teaching his students before an outside teacher educator was involved in his teaching context and that he had known what problems he needed to address. Nunan (1993) suggested that ‘inside out’ not ‘outside in’ is needed for a successful collaborative action research. I as an outside expert encouraged him to construct and reconstruct ‘his own theory’. It was underpinned that a classroom teacher should be at the heart of collaborative action research for meaningful teacher development, as shown in the interview with him.
Dr. Lee always let me raise many issues with her and cast matters of concern to me. At first, I felt worried because she did not tell me more even though she appeared to know the answers. I tried many times to solve the problems, but it was not easy to find solutions. Nonetheless, having repeated this process, I felt myself become the decision-maker of my study and tried to apply new ideas to the next class. Although it seemed to take time to find solutions, I thought that it might be a shorter way for me to improve and move forward. (from written accounts in April 2008)

Mr. Kim’s story illustrates how he established his position in collaborative action research with a teacher educator and how he became empowered in making decisions in the process of researching his classroom with his students. However, this does not mean that Mr. Kim worked and learned alone. Rather, he communicated with his tutor consistently. By constructing equality of voice between him and his tutor, Mr. Kim obtained hints to complete his ‘puzzle’ and finally realized how he learned and how his learners should learn. It is a fine example of meta-cognition in action.

(4) Conducting action research

In recent years, a great deal of the literature on English language teaching and learning seems to praise the virtues of ‘teacher research’ or ‘practitioner research’ (Wallace, 1999). In an English language teacher education context, the teacher-research approach is adopted as a way of teachers constructing and reconstructing their practical knowledge in a collaborative way with outside teacher educators or researchers (Burns, 1999, 2005). Few people seem to oppose such an enchanting notion as teacher learning with others in the pursuit of practical knowledge and altruistic human endeavor. However, Mr. Kim states his difficulties in conducting collaborative action research and how it is possible to overcome them.

It was a little bit difficult to prepare lessons twice a week and the writing parts covered in the textbooks were very limited. I made two lesson plans every week and carried them out 12 times in total. I tried to devise a writing activity suitable for collaborative activity, but the preceding research materials were not enough. Moreover, as I had to operate the analysis process of students’ feedback and class observation after finishing class, it was conducted at a rush schedule. (from written accounts in April, 2008)

Collaborative action research is different from individual research. From the start
to the end of the research process, it should be all together in conferencing, referencing and analyzing of the class. I was able to start my research with pleasure in company with Dr. Lee, but I was inconvenienced by the inadequate time and opportunity to discuss. Although this research has sought various ways to apply a rule to a case for an effective collaborative learning, it seems to have a long way to go. (from written accounts in April, 2008)

Mr. Kim voluntarily took part in the collaborative action research despite his workload and the lack of time. This has contributed the growth of his teacher identity.

3) Discussion

I could see Mr. Kim’s growth of teacher identity when he said that ‘Now, I can see a change!’ during the collaborative action research, which was the starting point of investigating the change. His growth in teacher identity is represented by the development of expertise in subject matter such as the reorganization of group constitution and the lesson planning, pedagogy such as communication skills and classroom research such as analyzing his lessons.

It is important to understand the factors which brought about his change in teacher identity. Above all, his positive attitudes towards addressing his vulnerability made it possible for him to overcome difficulties in conducting the collaborative action research and to initiate the collaborative action research voluntarily.

The participation in the collaboration action research itself is important as it gave him the opportunity to be exposed to outside expertise and to develop his ownership with the help of the outside expert. Despite many successful research findings which show teachers learn successfully by researching the on-going process, it has been criticized or avoided by many teachers and teacher educators because of difficulties such as extra workload, time-consumption and inadequate expertise (Hyo-shin Lee, 2007). In order to encourage teachers to become actively involved in the process of action research for teacher development, it is necessary to minimize these constraints.

Another important factor is continuous reflection of his teaching practice. Continuous reflection during the collaborative action research accelerated his learning and changed his teaching practice. Teachers learn how to teach through the reflective process (Wallace, 1991) and this implies that teacher education should put more emphasis on analytical and reflective learning based on personal differences between each learner-teacher, rather than learning through mere transmission of new skills and knowledge, imitation or modeling, as in the traditional models such as the Craft model or the Applied science model developed by Wallace (1991). This indicates that teachers can develop their own thinking by
integrating experience and skills with observation, analysis of context, self-awareness and the analysis of links between theory and classroom events (Roberts, 1998). It is also asserted that reflection on one’s personal and practical knowledge of teaching comes before meaningful and substantial changes in teaching practice (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). This reflective approach is expected to sharpen teachers’ skills in problem solving, determining students’ needs, and contribute to conducting ‘action research’ that is designed to develop new knowledge and skills related specifically to their schools and classrooms (Burns, 1999).

Finally, it is noticeable that he has established his ownership through collaboration. Equality of voice seems especially critical in the relationship between an outside expert and an inside classroom teacher because the classroom teacher should feel empowered to do research in his or her classrooms for professional development. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that the teacher educator as an outside expert should empower the classroom teacher as an inside researcher to do research to solve his or her own problems. The value of ownership was also observed in the process of doing collaborative action research for teacher development between a teacher as an insider and a teacher educator as an outsider throughout the research. Teachers’ ownership of teacher development means entire involvement in the whole process of decision-making about teacher learning and what, when, where and how to learn has emerged as an important issue (Nunan, 1989). ‘Ownership’ by teachers also means that, by having a voice in the classroom decision-making process, teachers foster a feeling of joint control and personal involvement (Bailey et al., 1996).

To sum up, Mr. Kim overcame vulnerability as an English teacher and experience growth of teacher identity represented by development of expertise though combining positive attitudes to address vulnerability, using the collaborative action research as an opportunity to improve his expertise and establish his ownership, and his continuous reflection. The main outcome of the collaborative action research is his capacity building and consequently gaining confidence. Charles Deforges’ equation for research capacity (cited in Davies & Salisbury, 2008), capacity = expertise × motivation × opportunities, is a useful framework to explain Mr. Kim’s capacity building. His capacity is the result of the multiplication of high motivation from positive attitudes, the opportunity for conducting collaborative action research to solve his problems and expertise which was provided by an external expert throughout the collaborative action research.

Most importantly, he gained confidence from the capacity building which had not been acquired from previous teacher education programs. It was observed that his perception of requirement for being a good English language teacher had changed from emphasis on his language competence and knowledge of teaching methodology to emphasis on pedagogical and didactical understanding. Consequently, he realized that he had sufficient
competency to provide good English language teaching, taking into account his current capacity in language competence, knowledge of teaching methodology and communication skills.

3. After Collaborative Action Research

1) Teacher Identity: Sustainability

As teacher identity is dynamic, it is important to sustain the positive perception of oneself after the collaborative action research. Mr. Kim shows the sustainability of his teacher identity. In his written account and conversation on the phone two years after the collaborative action research, he raises issues of group formation and regarded collaborative action research as a means of addressing the issue. This indicates his orientation to a teacher researcher.

I maintain that the group constitution is the important factor in collaborative learning. In a future study, I suggest an analysis of the various forming of groups like co-ed grouping and separate grouping, differentiated level of groups, etc. I look forward to doing a collaborative research with co-teachers in my school.

(from written accounts in April 2008)

Recently I finished research on a TEE (Teaching English in English) project with my colleagues. I was the team leader. It was really hard and not easy to work with others. But it was better than working alone because we can share workloads as well as ideas. I applied for a teacher training program to improve my TEE ability.

(from a conversation on the phone in October 2008)

2) Influencing Factors

When a teacher finishes collaborative action research with external experts who act as intervention for teacher identity development, he or she returns to the normal situation without intervention. This means that he or she begins another shift in teacher identity. Whether the teacher can maintain the positive identity depends on the response to influencing factors. They include factors internal to the individual such as emotion (van Veen & Sleegers, 2006) and external to the individual such as experiences in particular contexts (Flores & Day, 2006). Once he reshaped his teacher identity through the collaborative action research he could keep his change. This is why attention needs to be paid to the teacher identity beyond the competence such as language competence and
teaching methodology.

3) Discussion

Taking into account the fact that teacher identity shifts over time, it is important to maintain positive identity derived from teacher education and to strengthen it. As Mr. Kim was involved in the collaborative action research voluntarily and developed his positive identity through overcoming the vulnerability, he could maintain his development of identity. The effects of collaborative action research conducted by Mr. Kim are compared to his previous experience in teacher education programs in which the effects of those programs were not sustained. This suggests that factors influencing teacher identity need to be taken into consideration in designing and implementing teacher education programs.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore how collaborative action research has contributed to a teacher’s professional development. It employed a framework from the teacher identity perspective in analysing the teacher’s professional development in order to derive further insight into the underlying process and implications for designing and implementing teacher education programs. Mr. Kim’s shift in teacher identity is divided into three phases: before, during and after collaborative action research. The figure presents the key feature and factors influencing the effects of the collaborative action research at each stage.

Each phase represents a feature of Mr. Kim’s teacher identity. Before he began the collaborative action research, he experienced vulnerability in teacher identity arising from the lack of confidence in teaching English and low language competence. However, he built his command in subject matters, pedagogical aspects and classroom research through the collaborative action research. As a result, he could gain his confidence in English teaching. It is worth noting that his change, i.e., teacher identity growth, was made through change in his perception of the requirements for being an English teacher. Furthermore, it has been found that he showed the sustainability of his teacher identity for two years after the collaborative action research.
Understanding how change in teacher identity is made contributes to designing and executing teacher development programs. A variety of factors which influenced the change in teacher identity have been found. At first, it has been found that Mr. Kim’s vulnerability was based on the fact that he had not learned English teaching during his initial teacher education and that he had not gained confidence from in-service teacher education programs. In contrast, he experienced his growth in his teacher identity thorough collaborative action research. The analysis of his change from the teacher identity perspective has identified that a combination of a variety of factors has made his shift possible. He had positive attitudes to address his vulnerability, which enabled him to take part in the collaborative action research despite extra workload and lack of time. His continuous reflection and establishment of ownership during the collaborative action research also contributed to his growth in teacher identity. On the other hand, his sustainability of teacher identity may be mainly based on his reshaped identity taking into account the fact that no other big change in his teaching context was found.

The current study gives implications for English teacher education. Firstly, trainee-teachers should be the owners of teacher learning process, seen as an expert rather than as deficient beings. This view leads teachers away from dependency on external sources for the solution to their problems and towards professional growth and self-reliance in instructional decision-making. Secondly, the teacher learning process should involve a reflective process in which teachers think, rethink and reflect on what they have learned and experienced into formulating their practical knowledge. Thirdly,
teacher development should be regarded as an on-going personal process of change. In this view, teachers as ‘principal change agents’, not just as objects to be changed, can develop by actively participating in structuring the whole procedure through a reflective thinking process. Finally, it is suggested that teachers should be viewed as social learners who can construct and reconstruct their practical knowledge by communicating with others such as students, colleagues, teacher educators and societies.

This study has some limitations. As the collaborative action research was designed and implemented without considering the conception of teacher identity, it had limitations on the further investigate the complex processes of solving conflict and the factors related to the sustainability. The significance of this study is that the analysis of the research using teacher identity lens has allowed us to understand the role of teacher identity in collaborative action research. In this regard, this study suggests that further research needs to be conducted on the effects of teacher education programs from the teacher identity perspective, focusing on both the design and execution of programs.

REFERENCES


Analyzing the Effects of Collaborative Action Research from the Teacher Identity Perspective


Applicable level: Teacher education
Key words: Teacher identity, Collaborative action research, professional development

Hyoshin Lee
Department of Language, Curriculum and Communication