Students’ and Teacher’s Reflections on Project-Oriented Learning: A Critical Pedagogy for Korean ELT

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This paper explores students’ and teacher’s experiences with project-oriented learning, as a form of critical pedagogy for Korean English language teaching. The teacher in this study developed and implemented a model of project-based instruction into a Korean tertiary context. The data set consisted of learner journals, teacher journals, and interviews. Six findings were ascertained: (1) The project approach created resistance from both the students and the teacher; (2) Communication between the teacher and the students eased the students’ frustrations; (3) The goal-oriented nature of project work encouraged students to construct linguistic and topic-related knowledge; (4) Group work promoted independent and collaborative learning; (5) The teacher’s role as a facilitator continued to confuse the teacher; and (6) Plagiarism seemed to limit student learning. Based on the findings, two pedagogical implications were drawn: Student-centered approaches in large low-level classes would require some degree of teacher-centeredness in order to respond to language demands; and learner and teacher journals can serve as an indicator of a need for teacher-centered methods.

Key words: EFL, critical pedagogy, project work, reflection, resistance, dialogue

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2002, this researcher became interested in critical pedagogy and its applications in language classrooms, particularly Korean English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. In 2003, the researcher was involved in developing and implementing critical pedagogical practices in Korean tertiary classrooms. In 2015, this ELT researcher/teacher is still attempting to localize critical pedagogy for a pre-service teacher education program of English. On the one hand, the researcher/teacher has developed a few micro-level critical teaching approaches. However, the researcher is still experiencing resistance from the
students and herself when she implements these approaches. This compels this researcher/teacher to examine her ongoing attempts into Korean classrooms. As an initial step, this paper aims to explore the first experience of critically-oriented classes that the students and this researcher had in 2003.

This paper begins with a review of existing critical pedagogy literature, consisting of four elements: the overview of critical pedagogy, its application in ELT, its pedagogical approaches in Korean ELT, and its related critiques. Then the paper presents a study in which a project-oriented course as a form of critical pedagogy for Korean ELT was developed and implemented. Next, the paper deals with the teacher and student responses to project work, including their struggles and resistance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Until recently, ELT researchers and practitioners regarded the spread of English as a benign outcome of globalizing forces. As Block (2004) puts it, “We are living in a new and unprecedented world, where global capitalism, governance, and culture have replaced more local institutions, such as local financial institutions and business, national governments and local cultures, and in general terms have upset old hierarchies and ways of life” (p. 75). By contrast, Phillipson (1992) believes that the spread of English acts as a form of linguistic imperialism, while Pennycook (1994) and Canagarajah (1999) see the spread of English as too complicated to be considered benign or evil. Instead, they view it “from a variety of perspectives, from the critical to the post-modern” (Block, 2004, p. 76). Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994) have further alerted practitioners and researchers to the effects of ELT in relation to the local contexts, socially, politically, and economically. For a critical view on English and ELT, critical pedagogy offers some direction.

2.1. Critical Pedagogy and ELT

Studies focusing on critical pedagogy have investigated the development of critical perspectives in education (Cummins, 1989; Freire, 1985, 1993; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1994). Freire (1993) suggests a “problem-posing education” that accepts neither a “well-behaved” present nor a predetermined future (p. 65). He argues that the traditional “banking education”—where knowledge is neutral and is transferred unilaterally to unquestioning students, who are seen as “empty vessels” (Freire, 1993)—would not respond to the politics of power since it merely aims to “assimilate learners into the logic of the dominant system” (Tollefson, 1995, p. 11). In this sense, a teacher in the banking model “chooses the programme content, and the students adapt to it; the teacher chooses and
enforces this choice, and the students comply; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about” (Freire, 1993, pp. 46-47).

Some attempts to insert the concept of critical pedagogy into ELT have been made (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1996a, 1998, 2001; Tollefson, 1995; Wallerstein, 1983). They are based on learners’ realities where their life situations are conceived as problem-solving situations. These approaches concentrate on showing learners that they have the right to ask questions. Canagarajah (1999) differentiates critical ELT from mainstream ELT in pedagogical practice. From a mainstream pedagogical perspective, teaching and learning is “value-free, pragmatic, and autonomous” and “an innocent and practical activity of passing on correct facts, truths, and skills to students” (p. 17). By contrast, from a critical pedagogy perspective, teaching and learning are “implicated in the exercise of power and domination in society” and “what is learned orientates the learner to the world view and to ideologies of the status quo” (p. 17). Within a critical pedagogy classroom, English language learners could raise and solve a problem while using the target language instead of being the mere recipients of the linguistic knowledge. Therefore, the concept of critical pedagogy has great potential. In these circumstances, “if language learning is ideological, the solution is not to run away from politics but to negotiate with the agencies of power for personal and collective empowerment” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 173). Canagarajah claims that “ELT is not to eliminate that connection in favor of autonomy or purity, but to seek a holistic pedagogy that will enable learners to engage with those domains for a richer educational experience” (p. 173) as “the relation between the individual, language and society is a discursive production” (Davies, 1990, p. 342). How can ELT classrooms then offer a problem-posing education instead of banking education? How can critical pedagogy be put into practice, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms?

2.2. Critical Pedagogy and ELT in Korea

An EFL environment like Korea differs from an ESL setting. The language in EFL classrooms is English while the language outside the classroom is the student’s native language; in ESL contexts, the language both inside and outside of the classroom is English. Accordingly, ESL learners have more opportunities for day-to-day contact with the culture and language. The differences between these two contexts may lead to unique methodologies in applying critical pedagogy in practice. In ESL contexts, approaches such as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and community-based learning (Ashworth, 1985; Auerbach, 1996; Burnaby, 1988, 1992, 1998; Cumming & Gill, 1992; Rivera, 1999) can provide a problem-posing model where students are encouraged to bring their issues
into their English language learning contexts, investigate the problems, and transform the society as they situate themselves in their day-to-day settings. Such approaches would not suit an EFL setting that typically has a strong instrumental need of ELT (e.g., good scores on English tests) and does not necessarily include contact with English in the students’ daily lives. Accordingly, critical theories need to be redesigned and adapted for EFL teaching.

Research on critical pedagogy in Korea has recently increased. One example is that the Special Interest Group (i.e., Critical Pedagogy) of the Korea Association of Teachers of English (KATE) founded in 2008 has an ongoing discussion on related literatures and studies (e.g., Critical Pedagogy and World Englishes) through regular nationwide seminars and conferences. Another example is the increasing number of researchers and teachers in critical pedagogy in Korean ELT (e.g., Sung, 2004; Sung & Peterson, 2012). For application into EFL classrooms, the theory has some complications. For example, critical pedagogy makes broad claims about radical social changes and encounters some doubts about its effectiveness, as in the form of student resistance, due to its foreign nature. In this sense, its application to classrooms needs to be manageable for both teacher and student within typical EFL contexts (e.g., teacher-centered). In order to employ the elements of critical pedagogy such as critical dialogue, knowledge negotiation and collaborative learning, this study explores the possibilities of learner centeredness and project-oriented learning in classrooms. Learner centeredness could impart the elements of negotiation in learning and teaching (Hall, 1999); project-oriented learning could provide a form of Communicative Language Teaching (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p.12).

2.2.1. Learner centeredness

In light of the Korean EFL context, a student-centered approach would contribute to a critical pedagogy informed ELT model (Aldtkein & Alptekin, 1984; Hall, 1999). Hall (1999) explains that an emphasis on learner-centeredness might generate choice and control over the students’ own learning within an EFL setting. With this emphasis on learner-centeredness, the teacher becomes a facilitator of language learning rather than an expert and a provider. In this sense, a student-centered approach can provide the basis for moving from “purely linguistic concerns to social interests” (p. 10). Although a student-centered approach does not “pose problems”, its characteristic of what Hall calls “an emphasis on negotiation, the intertwining of method, syllabus and teaching, and its firm foundations of teacher-student interaction” is likely to move current EFL instruction towards a model of critical pedagogy (p. 17). For providing a student-centered environment in ELT, a project approach as a strong form of CLT in which student

2.2.2. Project-oriented learning

According to Fried-Booth (2002), project work functions as a bridge between using English in the classroom and in real-life situations. A project is defined as an extended task that usually integrates language skills work with an in-depth investigation of real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students (Beckett, 2002, 2005; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Debski, 2000a, 2000b; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Stoller, 1997). This view holds true to John Dewey’s (1938) ideas of experience and education – learning by doing – in which “experience is central to a quality educational experience, and experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiatives and desires, and purposes” (p. 31). The project approach can embody Dewey’s description of a new model of teaching, where teachers present a problem-posed situation and students confront the problem by gathering data and testing their conclusions. Dewey’s theory originated from Vygotsky’s constructivist approach where “a learner constructs new knowledge, building on whatever base of knowledge the learner already has”; and through interacting with their peers, students understand learning as a social practice (Moursund, 2003, p. xii).

The process of project learning includes selecting topics, making plans, doing research, and sharing results with others (Moss & Duzer, 1998). This practice combines “working towards an agreed goal and may include planning, the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, etc., discussion of the information, problem solving, oral or written reporting and display” (Hedge, 1993, p. 276). To apply this practice in ELT, Stoller (1997, p. 9) proposes a 10-step sequence of activities for project work. The language intervention steps (Steps 4, 6, and 8) are optional and are dependent on learners’ language proficiency and needs. The 10-step sequence follows:

   Step 1: Agreeing on a theme for the project
   Step 2: Determining the final outcome
   Step 3: Structuring the project
   Step 4: Language intervention
   Step 5: Gathering information
   Step 6: Language intervention
   Step 7: Compiling and analyzing information
   Step 8: Language intervention
   Step 9: Presenting final projects
Step 10: Evaluating the projects

Meanwhile, very little empirical research on project work exists, although there are instructional models and lists of resources (Thomas, 2000). For project work in EFL contexts, very few research studies have been undertaken; in fact, most are merely anecdotal reports (Guo, 2006). Studies on project-oriented learning in the Korean EFL context are conducted by reporting on instructional models (Han, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2006; Song, 2010). Research on EFL students’ perceptions of project learning as an activity containing a problem-posed situation is almost non-existent. Furthermore, as Beckett (2005) points out, the few available studies on ESL students’ perceptions of project work show contradictory results (Beckett, 2002; Eyring, 1989; Moulton & Homes, 2000; Wilhelm, 1999). Beckett’s claim recalls Debski’s (2000b) finding that not all students respond with equal enthusiasm to project learning. On the conflicts and contradictions associated with project learning, some studies suggest that students accustomed to the conventional teacher-centered approach may be alienated in this foreign learning environment, particularly due to the shift in the teacher-learner role (Beckett, 2002, 2005; Beckett & Slate, 2005; Warschauer, 2000). In other words, project work is a strong form of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach that primarily involves student-centered activities (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 12); this approach has the potential to create a symmetrical power relationship between teachers and students. The change in power structures might invoke students’ resistance, in a fashion similar to the critiques of CLT (Brown, 2000; Li, 2001; Liu, 1998). Thus, the current research set out to investigate the teacher and student experiences of project-oriented learning in the Korean ELT context. This empirical research was guided by two general questions:

1. How did the students perceive the project-oriented course?
2. What were the teacher’s perceptions of implementing the project-oriented course?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Framework

Qualitative research is a general term covering a variety of inquiry approaches used to comprehend a given phenomenon in depth through, for example, interpretation of participants’ beliefs within the context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; van Lier, 1990). Considering the two research questions above, this study adopted qualitative methods in this study. The two research questions involved the participants’ personal views about
values and the choices they made while teaching and learning English. In order to answer research question 1 (student perceptions on the student-centered course), for instance, this study analyzed data from learner journals and interviews thematically in relation to the question.

3.1.1. Participants and the teaching environment

The course was “English Practice,” which typically employed a lecture style in which a lecturer would read and translate an English book to the whole class; or the lecturer would play video clips and ask students to transcribe the scripts. The course of three credits was one of their liberal arts subjects. The 47 participants of this study were primarily first-year students, aged 19 to 25, from six departments—Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Engineering, Human Ecology, and Business Administration. The course was offered by the Department of English Language and Literature. The classroom where the course took place contained a computer with Internet access for the teacher and a projector to display web-sites on the computer.

3.1.2. Developing the course: Project-oriented learning

Project work was employed, as it involves a student-centered approach (Ivers & Barron, 2002; Moursund, 2003; Pennycook, 1996a, 1998). Through activities including deciding topics as well as compiling and analyzing topic-related information, the students were involved in the process of negotiation with group members. The emphasis on negotiation in project learning allowed the students to practice aspects of Freire’s critical pedagogy theory (e.g., self-directedness), where education should show students that they have the right to ask questions and construct their own knowledge. The students controlled their work to produce their projects; the teacher functioned as an assistant to the students’ knowledge construction.

3.1.3. Overview of the project-oriented course

In the course, the students produced group projects and prepared an oral presentation at the end of the semester. The course was conducted from March to June 2003 and was based on Stoller’s (1997) ten steps for developing a project in a language learning classroom. The 16-week course is outlined as follows: Stage I (two weeks) involved a general description of the group project creation process, and organized the students into groups. In Stage II (three weeks), the groups were asked to produce a project by choosing a topic, designing a web site with its contents, and allocating itemized tasks to each group.
member. In Stage III (seven weeks), the students produced the group projects by researching their tasks online and summarizing their findings. With teacher-centered language support for writing, the students wrote the contents in English and consulted the tutors via e-mail. Stage IV (a two-hour session) involved a hands-on technology class that taught students how to upload their pages to the Internet (see Appendix A: Topics and Contents of Ten Group Projects). Then teacher-centered language support was made available to help students prepare for public speaking. Stage V (three weeks) was filled with individual oral presentations to the whole class.

During the course, the first 10 minutes of each lesson was associated with reading and grammar activities. After half way through the course, the time was lengthened to 20 minutes as the teacher/researcher found through the student project journals that their language needs for the activities were considerably greater than expected. Towards the end of the course before the oral presentations, to prepare the students for their oral presentations, class time was used to practise the oral presentations, including the forms of public speaking, pronunciation and intonation.

3.2. Methods of Data Collection

The current study used three data collection methods: learner journals, teacher journals, and interviews.

3.2.1. Reflective learner journals

Reflective journals kept on a regular basis can offer insight into students’ growing understanding of their learning (Hiemstra, 2001). On the use of such journals in ELT classrooms, Nunan (1992) asserts that “journals are important introspective tools in language research” (p. 118). In this study, this approach was employed from the students’ and the teacher’s perspective. Through these journals, the students and the teacher could capture “systematic observations of insights, events, and changes in personal perspectives during the course” (p. 19). Student project journals that require the students to write weekly entries provide a means for a reflective approach to learning (Jang, 2009; Kim & Yi, 2010). The use of the journals investigated the students’ perspectives on the student-centered approach throughout their group projects. For detailed information, the students could use either their mother tongue or English while keeping the journals. Most journal entries were in Korean. Keeping these benefits in mind, the project journal in this study consisted of six topics: (1) what I did; (2) what information about the topic I already knew; (3) what I learned; (4) examples of what I learned; (5) troubles or questions; and (6) other matters.
3.2.2. Teacher’s reflective journals

A classroom journal kept on a regular basis was a means of documenting the teaching and research in this study by the researcher and teacher. Like interview notes, as noted by Nunan (1992), teaching journals and field notes can provide a description and interpretation of the participants, the course, and the research. The teaching journal in this study consisted of a format of “observation/reflection/plan” as recommended by Shafer (1995). At each stage, the teacher included lesson plans and worksheets for each week in addition to writing in the journal on the following three themes: the process of project work, problems, and suggestions. This teaching journal was written mainly after class but when necessary, in the midst of the class. This is helpful, as Power (1996) notes that both after the fact notes (a teaching journal) and in the midst notes (post-it notes) are beneficial: both help the researcher to reflect on the big picture and to capture critical incidents.

3.2.3. Individual interviews

After the project-oriented course, the researcher conducted individual interviews to investigate the students’ personal views on issues related to the question of student-centered approaches. The interviews were conceptualized with a typical interview guide approach, where “the interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (Patton, 1990, p. 283). All the interview sessions were recorded with the participants’ permission. Interview notes, as suggested by Nunan (1992), were made during each interview session to provide supplementary information. The interviews were conducted with the 11 of the 47 participants in the teacher’s office at the university (see Appendix B: Interviewee Profiles). Note that although 11 participants were interviewed, there were only ten interview sessions; one of the interview sessions involved two participants due to a participant’s late arrival.

3.3. Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were qualitatively analyzed using QSR NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. Thematic analysis was used to examine the student project journals, teacher journals, and interviews. Integrating the analyses of all the data for each student contributed to an understanding of each student’s experience in producing projects aligned with the course objectives. The study used an inductive process to discover critical themes emerging from the data. Data were coded into descriptive and meaningful categories to provide a framework for analysis (see Appendix C: Coding Categories). As
the data were explored, text annotations were coded and an index system was established. Search tools within the NVivo software were used to link, explore, and ask questions to determine relationships and to establish hierarchies within the data. The method of analysis for this study was “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 157). Interviews transcriptions allowed for the initial coding and indexing of the data. Other text imported into the software program included a text from learner journals and teacher journals. The most of the raw data were in Korean. The data were typed and converted into Microsoft Word files by the teacher/researcher. The teacher/researcher and the research assistant categorized the data independently. Then the significant data were translated into English by the teacher/researcher.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students’ Perception of the Project-Oriented Course

A critical approach employed in the course is project work consisting of student-centered group work. The students’ perceptions of the approach were highly complicated. The perceptions also changed throughout the course. Some students said that the course in general seemed demanding and time-consuming. As the activities throughout the course were student-centered, student participation was crucial. The interviews revealed what seemed to be a gap between the expectations of the course and of the students. The students expected a passive role in a teacher-centered approach, whereas the course required their active involvement. In particular, group work was controversial among the students. Some found it challenging to negotiate with their group members, while others saw it as an opportunity to express their opinions. Overall, the student perceptions ranged from struggle to a sense of achievement.

4.1.1. Confusion and resistance

The project-oriented course began with confusion, which led to student frustration and resistance. Moreover, the students became angry with their group members, the teacher, and the course. They expressed their feelings and opinions to the teacher through the project journal and the interviews. The struggle and confusion were attributed to two factors. First, the project approach was foreign to the students and thus alienated them. The
course used student-centered approaches, whereas the students expected teacher-centered
learning. The students therefore found the course different and confusing. This echoes
Beckett and Slater’s (2005) claim of students’ confusion about different learner roles and
active involvement in learning process. Students expressed that they had a burdensome and
anxious feeling about the approach. This feeling seemed to result from the unexpected and
considerable amount of group tasks. The tasks are very different from those in a teacher-
centered course, where spoon-fed linguistic knowledge such as grammar would be given to
the whole class. The following excerpt exemplifies this anxiety:

I’m worried about the course this semester. Frankly speaking, I don’t know what to do
and I doubt our group members can follow it. This is too different from I expected.
(Project journal: Student 27 on March 11, 2003).

Secondly, low participation from some group members increased the workload for active
and competent students; this also contributed to the confusion. The frustrated students said
that they had to make up for the work of some of their group members, particularly those
who rarely participated in the group activities. Additionally, the supporting role of the more
competent students also contributed to the workload level. Some of the students with good
language skills spent time supporting other group members and felt it to be time-
consuming. Consequently, some students even preferred to work alone:

I’m honestly so angry. To be honest, I can’t say I’m active but this is too much. They just
don’t want to do their work and leave it to others. I don’t want to do it either. (Project
journal: Student 16 on March 27, 2003)

I have my own things to do but have to spare time to support others. I felt burdened
although I know I am their group leader. (Interview: Won, 2nd year male student in
Business Administration)

4.1.2. Dialogue, negotiation, and reflection

The students’ overall anxiety level gradually decreased after the half-way point of the
course. The dialogue process appeared to have helped resolve students’ attitudes, while the
students engaged in the course activities after this midpoint. Through the learner journals,
the students expressed their feelings and the teacher responded to their concerns in class.
One student said his understanding that their frustrations were taken into account by the
teacher influenced his attitude to the course:
I understand that you read our project journals and that you noticed we had a lot of problems with the group work. And you changed what you initially planned to do. In addition, you included enough writing composition lessons, which helped me a lot with my writing. Also, the fact that the Professor got to know that we struggled greatly helped us emotionally. (Project journal: Student 6 on May 6, 2003)

Another factor contributing to the changing attitudes was the students’ involvement in negotiating the course syllabus. After they understood that their frustrations were responded to in class, the students attempted to make changes to the course curriculum. One student even made a suggestion that the course should include a bulletin board so that the students could share their opinions and understandings:

I hope to exchange our opinions with other students about the tasks online. It would be helpful to include a bulletin board on the course web page. (Project journal: Student 27 on May 27, 2003)

The reflective process also helped reshape the students’ perspectives. While engaging in the dialogue through the learner journals, the students attempted to reflect on the course activities. Some eventually understood the approach of the course and took it as something natural:

At the beginning of the course, I was not happy with the course as it was too tight. However, I now feel it was somehow natural and have no complaint or difficulties. (Project journal: Student 3 on May 20, 2003)

The use of explicit instructions with defined tasks was an example of the changing course syllabus. The issues of increasing workloads on particular students were addressed after they were made known to the teacher in the learner journals. Doff (1991, p. 142) suggested that the use of “clear instructions,” “defined tasks,” and “a routine” would make group tasks manageable and thus encourage each student engage in the group work activities. To enhance this, the teacher in the current study used explicit classroom instructions with defined activity tasks for group members; this allowed the students to know how and what to do, thereby becoming more involved in group activities. The teacher further changed the assessment criteria towards increasing individual student assessment by including task participation and presentation participation.
4.1.3. Ownership of learning and the goal-oriented nature

At the end of the course, most students successfully completed their group projects. Some learners even expressed their gratitude towards the teacher:

PS. Professor, I was initially puzzled and complained a lot about the course as we haven’t heard about this way of teaching nor understood the methodology. However, we learned a lot of good things by the end of the course. I wanted to tell this to you but can’t find a way other than through this project journal…Thank you. (Project journal: Student 6 on June 3, 2003)

One reason that the student appreciated the project learning course is that the project work activities encouraged the students to develop ownership of their learning. Learning emerged through students’ experiences and they became investigators of the learning process; the teacher was freed from the role of passivizing learners (Pennycook, 2010). Some interviewees said that in comparison with teacher-decided topics, their involvement in deciding and negotiating the topics according to their interests was the driving force of their learning process:

Well, all of our members agreed to the topic as we’re interested in it and we reached an agreement together. We could understand the content easily as we are interested in it. We participated in searching for information related to the topic eagerly. I think deciding the topic according to their interests with themselves is better than just taking a class. (Interview: Jong, 1st year male student in Information Engineering)

Another reason why students appreciated project work is that the projects played a significant role as a goal to pursue (Pennycook, 1996a, 1998). The two factors further allowed them to take control of their knowledge construction. Some students expressed that they learned a lot, not only linguistically but also in terms of the topics of the projects. The following excerpts are representative of this group of students:

I worked on a group task in which I investigated a web page. I was supposed to write and translate the content into English. I asked people around me about some words and grammar related to the task. While doing this, I got to know more about the content of the project and the language. (Interview: Jong, 1st year male student in Information Engineering)
4.1.4. Group work: Cooperation and interpersonal skills

Group work is an essential element of project work. The student perceptions of group work also changed from time-consuming to useful. Factors affecting the student attitudes towards group work were cooperation and interpersonal skills development. These factors are similar to the key features of project-oriented learning described by Legutke and Thomas (1991). In an atmosphere where students freely expressed their opinions, they discussed anything related to their projects and cooperated with each other. All of these contributed to making the group tasks easier. During the course, the students participated in group activities with their group members. The interviewees expressed group work engaged in some degree of cooperation and peer feedback:

Firstly, our group leader gave each of us tasks in details. And our group members discussed competently what we found. I liked this very much. In particular, our group leader has good English skills. He can speak it very well and knows a lot of the grammar. If we had a word we didn’t know, he could translate it into English quickly. His help makes things much easier. We are learning together about how to upload our projects to the internet these days and have no problem so far. (Interview: Jong, 1st year male student in Information Engineering)

Some interviewees further mentioned that group work contributed to their interpersonal skills development:

Yes, initially, I thought I had to decide the topic of the group project with the group members. Then, we had lots of arguments about which topic to choose and became close each other. [Laughing] We somehow learned how to be considerate toward others. Also, I got to know what they thought. Therefore, I should say in the future that I would be more careful of what I’m saying. This is an English course but I seemed to learn so many other things, not just English, really. That is… Um [Laughing]. (Interview: Hyon, 1st year female student in Human Ecology)

4.2. Teacher’s Perception of the Project-Oriented Course

The teacher’s perception of project work is also highly complicated. While implementing the student-centered course, the teacher encountered a few problems. These unexpected problems were recorded primarily in the teacher journal (though some are found in the interview data). Completed after each class, the teacher journal intended to represent reflections on her teaching during the 16-week course. The themes were divided
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into three areas: teacher’s role, feelings, and problems. The teacher’s entries continued until the end of the course. The analysis revealed that the teacher’s uncertainty persisted throughout the entire course. In order to understand the teacher’s experiences, understanding the cultural aspects of the teaching context is important.

4.2.1. Teacher’s changing role: Facilitator

Through the weekly learner journals, the students showed their struggles to a degree. During the interview sessions, they continued openly to express their confusion, frustration, and anger towards the teacher/researcher. The teacher had responsibility of the project-oriented course as she designed the course and asked students to share their opinions on the course. As expected, the students expressed their feelings and perceptions. The teacher took their attitudes as misbehavior or even rudeness. After a year, she understood this issue was related to the changing teacher role. In a traditional banking-education classroom, the teacher has authority as a provider of knowledge; in the student-centered project-oriented classroom, the teacher’s role shifts to that of a facilitator. This change in the teacher’s role towards a symmetrical power relation seemed to confuse the traditional teacher and contribute to the anger.

4.2.2. High rate of absenteeism: Local culture

The teacher’s confusion and resistance seemed to be related to certain practical cultural issues. The high rate of student absences during the first month is an example. Since the course was new to the students, it was expected that they would have some struggles. Nevertheless, the absence rate was excessively high, and this rate could escalate student struggle. The high rate seemed to be related how most students in the class were in their first year. First-year students have certain tendencies, which are discussed below.

One is the desire for stress relief. The first-year students tended to be more relaxed and less responsible for their learning than students beyond the freshman year for two main reasons. Firstly, both the male and female students have just gone through the notoriously fierce competition of the university entrance examination, the so-called Ipsi jiok (examination hell) (Seth, 2002, p. 171), where they studied 15 hours a day for three years in high school (Years 10 to 12). Secondly, the male first-year students wanted a break before their compulsory two-year military service. Most male university students take a minimum two-year study leave for military service after their first or second year of study (Ministry of National Defense, 2006). Their desire for stress relief in the first year provided an extra challenge to the demands of the unconventional, student-centered course; this created a number of problems, such as a high absence rate. It also contributed to the
students’ and the teacher’ confusion and frustration during the initial stages of the course.

The other tendency is the students’ involvement in frequent extracurricular activities. Most first year students regarded parties and sports events as important for establishing their social networks, and therefore actively participated in these activities. As a result, the majority of the students were absent for at least a few weeks during the first month. This seriously affected their project progress and slowed it down during the remainder of the course. Student participation was crucial in this course. In particular, during the first few weeks, learners were supposed to find a group and decide on their project topic. Week 5 was the first time the teacher was able to see most of the enrolled students together. The teacher expressed her frustration about the absenteeism in her journal:

It has been a month since the course started and some student are still absent because of extracurricular activities. Why are the activities held during the week days rather than on the weekends? They seem to think they should only play this month. Why should I have to worry about this? It’s the students who should be responsible for what they do. But I can’t let it be like this. (Teacher journal: Week 4, March 25, 2003)

The teacher’s concern for the students’ absence further contributed to a growing self-doubt about her teaching ability, her capacity to control the course, and her understanding of the project approach.

4.2.3. Plagiarism

Another issue in the course was plagiarism. While browsing web pages related to their group projects, students copied and used excerpts from these sites for their own web pages. Through the discussion with the writing tutors, the teacher discovered some students copied from other web-sites without acknowledgement. Furthermore, some learners used online machine translation services. The students’ use of available online translation services became a major challenge in this course. Students were anxious about their written proficiency and how their written tasks would be assessed; they thus resorted to online translation services to appear more proficient:

Well, to be honest with you, there are web-sites that translate Korean into English. I used it initially. I was told that other students use them too. The online translation services are very quick. You just write in Korean on the web-sites and get it in English immediately. I used it [laugh]. Then I tried to write a couple of sentences in English after we got grammar and writing classes during the course. (Interview: Mun, 1st year female student in Human Ecology)
Research on dealing with plagiarism is culturally complex (Pennycook, 1996b; Scollon, 1995) and sensitive in nature (Hyland, 2001), and it also seemed beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the teacher focused on overcoming plagiarism in the classroom by adapting Sutherland-Smith’s (2008) suggestion that “assessment tasks should neither enable nor reward plagiarism by students” (p. 197). The teacher made the decision to change the assessment criteria for written tasks so that full marks were awarded to any composition that was comprehensible. The teacher then discussed the issue with the students, reminded them that the purpose of the class was to improve their English, and emphasized the importance of practicing their writing. The teacher then informed the class of the amended writing assessment criteria and warned them of the penalty for using online translation services. The teacher added that if the quality of the writing was above average, she would reread it with reference to the student’s submitted assignments. Reducing the standard of assessment for written tasks seemed to encourage the students to write, regardless of personal evaluations of proficiency.

4.2.4. Large classes: Teacher-controlled and explicit instructions

Having a large class is another issue. How can teachers become facilitators in a class with more than 40 students? According to Clifton (2006), “facilitation is perhaps best suited to small groups of motivated, mature, relatively advanced learners working in an environment in which having more responsibility for learning is culturally acceptable” (p. 147). In fact, the difficulty of dealing with a class of 47 students was apparent from the initial stages. The teacher recalls being physically and emotionally exhausted throughout the course.

During her struggles, the teacher learned that a few teacher-controlled activities were needed in larger teacher-as-facilitator classrooms. McHoul (1978) suggests, in relation to facilitator talk, “larger groups require a more formalized turn-taking structure if the potential number of self-starters is not to reduce interaction to chaos” (p. 198). Larger classes with less proficient students like the teacher’s own seemed to require more teacher-centered approaches than smaller classes. The teacher’s provision of certain explicit tasks in group work was an example of when the teacher used teacher-centered tasks. The teacher notes (e.g., lesson plans and worksheets) showed that the teacher used worksheets that contained clear, detailed instructions and included the estimated time a task should take. To signal to students the estimated time for each activity, the teacher also used some popular songs that usually lasted for less than five minutes. Teacher-controlled language support in stages III and IV is another example of this.
5. CONCLUSION

This is a report of the teacher’s ongoing research journey to conceptualize critical pedagogy in Korean ELT. To make critical teaching manageable and reduce resistance to patently new pedagogy, this study employs some elements of critical pedagogy such as critical dialogue, knowledge negotiation and collaborative learning. Considering that learner centeredness could involve the elements of negotiation and collaboration in classrooms (Hall, 1999), and project-oriented learning could provide a form of learner centeredness as project work is a “strong” form of CLT (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 12), this study explores the possibilities of learner centeredness and project-oriented learning.

This study is unique for two reasons. It attempted to apply the highly complicated and abstract concept of critical pedagogy, operationalized as student-centered group work in project-oriented classrooms. In the classrooms, students can take control of their knowledge construction (Pennycook, 1998), that is, they can “determine what will transpire in the classroom,” and then “manage their own affairs,” and in contrast, teachers play a “supportive, coaching role,” “discreetly identifying errors and inappropriate language use” while “inviting and encouraging the students to determine what will transpire in the classroom” (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993, pp. 568-570).

Another unique feature is that this study is implemented into a traditional Korean ELT classroom (i.e., teacher-centered). The researcher developed a project-oriented course framework, and the study then reports how the project approach was implemented in a conventional tertiary context with a large class of 47 students.

The report does not idealize what happened; the confusion and resistance to the new approach are evident from both the teacher and the students. In the meantime, the report adds that a regular dialogic process between the teacher and students through weekly learner journals managed to negotiate and respond to the resistance. Furthermore, the teacher reflective process through the teacher journals contributed to appropriation of the student-centered project approach e.g., by providing teacher-controlled activities and changes in the assessment criteria.

For the student learning process, the goal-oriented nature of project work encouraged the students to construct linguistic and topic-related knowledge. In addition, group work further helped the student learning process to become independent and collaborative. In the teacher teaching process, the foreign role of a teacher-facilitator continued to confuse the teacher as she negotiated the teaching and learning process. Students’ free attitudes to raise their opinions are an example. Moreover, the emerging issues of student plagiarism seemed to limit the learning and teaching process.

These findings suggest two implications. Pedagogically speaking, large, student-centered classes with less proficient students require some degree of teacher-centered
methods so students can become accustomed to the approach. Both learner and teacher journals can help teachers ascertain the need for any teacher-centered methods. Additionally, further research is needed. Among the issues discussed here, the teacher’s role as a facilitator is to be considered further. During the student-centered group work, the teacher positioned herself as a facilitator, not as a provider who imposed her linguistic knowledge on the students. However, conceptualizing facilitator role was challenging. According to Stevick (1998) and Underhill (1999), a teacher as a facilitator is one who empowers students and gives them more opportunity for initiative and responsibility. Did being a facilitator mean providing a substantial amount of class time for the students to talk? What would it mean in a classroom where they all had fluency in their own language, as in this study, but low levels of English? In a large class, how could the teacher assist individual students in unfamiliar activities? These questions reflect the set of complex issues involved in this study, such as the difference between ESL and EFL settings, the use of the students’ own language rather than English in an EFL classroom, and large classes.

REFERENCES


Hall, G. (1999). *Redefining the syllabus: An investigation into whether syllabuses can meet learners’ linguistic and social needs*. Centre of Research in Language Education Papers, Department of Linguistics, Lancaster University.


**APPENDIX A**

**Topics and Contents of Ten Group Projects**

*Group 1. Tourism sites in city of Mokpo:*

The web site was about tourism sites in Mokpo. The web pages described two sites: the national maritime museum and Mt. Yudal. Each web page included information about public transport. The pages resembled a tourist guide book. It merely dealt with information that was unquestionable such as the timetable of the public transport.
Group 2. Smoking:
The web site dealt with smoking. It comprised just the main page which contained the introduction of the topic, raising smoking-related health problems. There was no further development of the topic or the problem.

Group 3. Daegu subway fire calamity:
The web site dealt with a recent disaster, the Daegu subway calamity. It explained why they chose the topic, presented the summary of the fire and discussed the accident. Overall, the web site connected the calamity to social issues, arguing the need to improve the legal regulation of fire (no use of inflammable materials inside the subway) and the social welfare system.

Group 4. Korean New Year’s Day:
The web site was about Korean New Year’s Day. It detailed the celebrations in terms of foods, cloths and games. The first web page introduced the Day in general. The next three web pages dealt with the special foods, such as what the foods were and how to make them in detail. Another web page described the traditional clothes that people wear. The last three web pages explained some holiday games.

Group 5. Traditional Korean music performance in face masks, Talnori:
The web site focused on a Korean music performance where the players wear a mask, Talnori. Five web pages dealt with the origin, meanings and different kinds of performance nationwide. It concluded with an explanation of similar performances in other countries. The web site mainly aimed to introduce aspects of cultural heritage, but did not take account of any cultural issues.

Group 6. North Korea:
The web site dealt with North Korea in terms of its economics, daily life and some current issues. Each web page focused on the description of each issue. The web site considered the content as fact and did not raise any problem or make any connection with social issues or themselves. When they chose the topic the teacher reminded them of the strict censorship regarding North Korea. The students’ understanding of the censorship seemed to contribute to their focus on non-political aspects of the topic.

Group 7. Online computer game, Lineage:
The web site investigated one of their favourite computer games, Lineage. A web page identified the students involved in the project and then introduced the computer game. Two further pages examined its potential problems: money-related characteristics and addictive elements. Another page made some suggestions related to the problems. It concluded with their reflections on the topic, including their feelings and opinions.
Group 8. Soccer:
The web site was about soccer. It described the origin of soccer in the world and in Korea. It examined soccer in the world leagues and the Korean league. One of the web pages, “the influence of soccer on society”, seemed to deal with potential problems of soccer but it had no content. The following two pages also were incomplete. Overall, the site merely described the topic.

Group 9. Korean TV programs:
The web site examined some controversial Korean TV programs. The programs were *Supo Sondai* (Super Sunday), *Ilyonil-un chaemitta* (Sunday is happy), *Gaegu concert* (Gag concert) and TV news. A common element of the shows was violence. Each web page dealt with one of the shows and discussed it. Then, the site dealt with its violent aspects by connecting them to social issues.

Group 10. Korean music performance, Samulnori Hanmadang:
The web site dealt with a Korean music performance, *Samulnori Hanmandang*. It explained why Korean musical heritage should be maintained by arguing that it has faded away. The following web page examined its current slow status. Then, it made some suggestion to revitalize it.

**APPENDIX B**

Interviewee Profiles (*N* = 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Background Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1st HE</td>
<td>She did not browse any English web-sites related to her writing task. She thought that some fun elements (e.g., learning English popular songs, etc.) were needed, as the course was rather serious.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mun</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1st HE</td>
<td>She planned to improve her English during the coming summer vacation, particularly her reading and listening.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1st E</td>
<td>He had not yet completed his military service.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jong</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1st E</td>
<td>He was going to complete his military service the following year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2nd BA</td>
<td>He completed his military service and returned to the university. He tended to be devoted and serious with his study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4th H</td>
<td>She was already competent in English and was enthusiastic in learning the English language. With her busy schedule job hunting as a final year student, she found that this student-centered course was stressful, as it was demanding for her.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Won</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2nd BA</td>
<td>He had a part-time job teaching English to secondary students. He thought English would be important for his worldwide travel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2nd BA</td>
<td>He was enthusiastic about the course, as he thought it would be useful for his upcoming study-abroad program. With his experience as a part-time English tour guide, he felt comfortable with talking to English speakers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yun</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1st SS</td>
<td>As he had not completed his military service yet, he felt relaxed with his study. He was a shy and quiet student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1st BA</td>
<td>He had not completed his military service yet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1st HE</td>
<td>Due to some conflicts with group members, she missed the oral presentation. However, she participated in the activities throughout the course.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* HE = Human Ecology; E = Engineering; BA = Business Administration; H = Humanities; SS = Social Science.
APPENDIX C
Coding Categories

Sample Tree and Sub-Tree Diagram for Issues on Project Work
1. Positive -> positive
2. Negative -> positive
   1) Participation. High mark
   2) If it has to do, do it well
   3) Appropriate amount of tasks
   4) Accustomed to the approach. Will to complete projects
   5) Comprehensible instruction
   6) New approach
3. Negative -> negative
4. Positive -> negative
5. No thought
6. Reason for negative attitude (initially)
   1) Because it is English
   2) Burden for (writing)
   3) Many things to do
7. Burden for writing
   1) Suggestion
8. Burden for oral presentation
9. Instruction during the class
   1) Incomprehensible

Applicable levels: Tertiary

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