Korean English teacher's disempowerment in English-only classes: A case study focusing on Korea-specific cultural aspects

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Korean English Teacher's Disempowerment in English-only Classes: A Case Study Focusing on Korea-specific Cultural Aspects

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(Chung-Ang University)

Abstract

Hwang, Sung-Sam, Seo, Hyo-Sun, Kim, Tae-Young. 2010. Korean English Teacher’s Disempowerment in English-only Classes: A Case Study Focusing on Korea-specific Cultural Aspects. *The Sociolinguistic Journal of Korea* 18(1). In this case study, we have focused on the disempowerment of a Korean English teacher (KET) in English-only classrooms. Six English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in a Korean high school were observed and analyzed by using interpretive discourse analysis. Out of the six classes, three representative classrooms were both video- and audio-taped. The results show that the English-only classes could weaken the KETs’ power via three mechanisms: (a) calling the KETs’ last name for choral greetings at the beginning of the class, (b) students’ group solidarity and peer pressure between classmates, and (c) the students’ excessively collaborative approach to peer assistance. It is argued that the exclusive English-only instruction disempowers the KETs’ status and dismantles their vocational identity. In order to remedy the current situation, within a scaffolding supported by the eclectic use of first language where necessary for effective class management, KETs are empowered and overcome constraints imposed by the limited L2 oral competence of some non-native English teachers.

Keywords: English-only instruction, Korean English teacher, disempowerment, Confucian academic culture, teaching English through English (TTEE), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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I. Introduction

This paper presents a case study of a Korean English teacher's (KET's) personal perception of disempowerment occurring in high school classrooms. Recent studies on teaching English through English (TETE) have mainly investigated students' language improvement and the effectiveness of TETE felt by teachers and students (S.-A. Kim 2002; S.-Y. Kim 2008; J.-H. Lee 2007). In-depth, thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of the dynamics of second language (L2) only instruction from the perspective of culture and power in secondary classrooms have rarely been reported. We therefore believe that the present case study necessitates a re-evaluation of the meaning of TETE as the dynamic sphere integrating Korean students and teachers' cultural values and perceptions of power distribution. Since the nature of the case study does not generalize the phenomena investigated within a limited domain (Duff 2008), we do not argue that the Korean culture-specific phenomena reported here can be equally applied to similar circumstances. Neither do we focus on the generalizability often emphasized in quantitative research tradition. Rather, by precisely describing and explaining these phenomena, we intend to attain credibility or transferability (Lincoln & Guba 1985) of research. As van Lier (2006) argues, the prime role of a case study is to give insights into a wide variety of other cases, so long as contextual differences are taken into account.

II. Research Background

Recently, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (SMOE) in South Korea launched a policy mandating English teachers in primary and secondary English classes to conduct TETE at least once a week as part of a new foreign language policy (Choi 2008; H.-S. Lee 2008). Educational policymakers in Korea are emphasizing an increased authentic English input in English classrooms by switching the medium of instruction from Korean (first language or L1) to English (L2) (K.-R. Lee 2008). It is assumed that the input flood will improve the competence in English communication of the Korean students. Often integrated with the macro social discourse of national competitiveness (T.-Y. Kim 2006a; Park 2006), TETE is now considered an essential part of English education in Korea.

However, when implementing the above education policy reform in English instruction in Korea, the voices of students and teachers in English classrooms often been neglected. As a result, the conditions and challenges of TETE implementation in Korea have not been reported in previous studies. Since the language choice in foreign language classrooms is often so closely linked with issues of power negotiation and distribution between the instructor and students or even within the instructor (Auerbach 1993), the implementation of an English-only policy in English as a foreign language (EFL) context may mean more than a simple application of the communicative language teaching. In other words, the instigation of the recent English-only policy as an effective educational approach may lead to unexpected tensions among students and/or teachers in Korean EFL classrooms.

Therefore, an empirical case study research on classroom culture and teachers' sense of power and control in the L2-only classrooms will provide insights from sociocultural and sociopolitical viewpoints. As every community has its own distinctive microculture (Flowerdew & Miller 1995), so do the L2-only classrooms. Accordingly, we focus on the issue of culture in the L2-only classroom to illuminate the sociocultural difficulties which Korean English teachers (KETs) experience. We examine how L2-only instruction may exert a negative impact on the KETs' perceived power for classroom management. This article proposes permitting eclectic uses of code-switching from L2 to L1 in order to empower KETs as knowledgeable English language teaching professionals.

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1) In this paper, we use L2 as a general term that includes both foreign and second languages, while L1 means the first language, Korean.

2) Since the distinction between the exclusive use and maximal use of L2 is not clear, we use L2-only, including the maximal use of and exclusive use of L2.
III. The Current Policy on English Education in Korea

By 2012, every public teacher in Korea is required to use English as the instructional language in all English classes for the Public Education Completion Project (W.-J. Lee & M.-S. Kim 2008). Despite this rapid change in the educational policy for TETE, the statistics on L2-only instruction for the last five years show only a slow progress. According to a self-rating survey of 33,162 KETs by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources (2007), representing approximately 95% of the total population of KETs, 58.1% stated that they have the ability to give at least one L2-only class a week, whereas 33.5% reported that they actually give at least one L2-only class per week (see Tables 1 and 2). As shown in Table 1, although slightly decreased in high school, the percentage of KETs who can give at least one TETE shows an increasing pattern from primary to high school levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One hour or more a week in TETE (%)</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-switching into Korean in TETE (%)</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly speaking Korean in TETE (%)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The Percentage of English Teachers Who Had Confidence in TETE (adapted from Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2007)

As shown in Table 2, in high school, the percentage of One hour or more went down from 32.5% to 28.4% by 3.9%, Code-switching from 61.7% through 57.8%, whereas Mainly speaking Korean more than doubled from 5.8% to 13.9% by 8.1%. Meanwhile, in Table 2, the percentage of KETs in primary school who teach One hour or more in TETE soared from 17.2% to 39.7% by 22.5%, Code-switching plummeted from 71.4% to 54.6% by 16.8%, and Speaking Korean lessened from 11.4% to 5.6% by 5.8%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One hour or more a week in TETE (%)</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-switching into Korean in TETE (%)</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly speaking Korean in TETE (%)</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The Percentage of English Teachers Who Actually Conducted TETE in 2003 and 2007 (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2007)

In addition, W.-J. Lee and M.-S. Kim (2008) state that in a survey conducted by the Association of English Teachers in Korea, approximately 80% of KETs do not agree with the administration's L2-only language policy.

IV. Literature Review

As Fairclough (1996) claims, power is manifested by language use in institutional practices. Since public education can be considered as the exemplary location of institutional practice, KETs' language choice is inherently connected to their perceived power. In this section, we highlight two aspects influencing KETs' disempowerment and the restoration of KETs' power and authority of TETE in Korea: 1) the cultural considerations in implementing

3) Various underlying factors may explain why the majority of KETs in public educational institutions are not enthusiastic about the use of English as the main medium in English classes. For example, S.-Y. Kim (2002) points out the KETs' difficulties in TETE: 39% of teachers surveyed indicated their limited L2 oral proficiency and 18% denoted the low levels of L2 learners' interest and motivation.
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TETE in Korea, and 2) the potentially beneficial effects of code-switching from L2 to L1.

1. Cultural Considerations in L2-only EFL Classrooms

1) Change of Greeting in English

The first cultural value to consider is the change to a greeting in English in L2-only EFL classrooms. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the way in which people think and behave is strongly affected by their native languages (Koerner 2008). In that strand, the change to a greeting in English in L2-only EFL classrooms might influence students’ thoughts and behaviors. In the greeting practice, when it changes from the Korean 'annyeonghasibnikka [good morning/afternoon/evening, or how are you, sir?]’ to the English 'Good morning/afternoon, Mr./Ms. X’, the manner of greeting also changes from bowing, a kinesthetic decorum in all Korean classroom settings to verbal greeting alone.

The kinesthetic decorum in greeting found in Korean classrooms is closely related to Confucianism, the national orthodox teaching (Son 2006) during the Joseon Dynasty (AD 1392-1910) which traditionally prided itself on being a more orthodox Confucian nation than the homeland of Confucianism, China (Yao 2000). Son (2006) states that “it is not inaccurate to say that Confucianism, an ancient Chinese religion and philosophy, has had an influence more far reaching in the minds and life of people in South Korea than any other religion or philosophy” (p. 328). Since the Joseon Dynasty, the status of teachers had often been elevated to that of a monarch or father. This Korean tradition seems in line with the Confucian phrase, 『師父一體』 (generally interpreted as ‘one’s teacher is on a par with one’s father or monarch in terms of respect and loyalty’). It indicates that a teacher has the same power and authority as the students’ father has (Flowerdew & Miller 1995).

The tradition of bowing in Korea has been reinforced by another classical Chinese phrase, 出必告, 反必面 (i.e., whenever you leave your house, bow to your parents and every time you come back from your outing, bow to your parents again). Although many Koreans are not keenly aware of the existence of this phrase, this kind of social practice was incessantly praised as a desirable virtue, usually combined with filial piety, throughout the Joseon Dynasty in Korea.

Therefore, the greeting to their teachers implies the students’ modesty and deep respect for teachers in Korea. Given this cultural background, the greeting is a solemn ritual always requiring both verbal expressions and an appropriate bodily decorum. Since the status of teachers is often equated with that of a monarch, calling teachers by their last name even with honorific titles (e.g., Mr./Ms./Dr.) might be considered socially inappropriate. Only the job title alone without the last name is allowed as an acceptable euphemism. Accordingly, Korean students greet their teachers by saying annyeonghasibnikka [Good morning/afternoon/evening] alone and may add seonsaengnim [teacher] at the end of their greeting, while during class they address their teacher as seonsaengnim [teacher].

Another aspect in this change to a greeting in English is that students’ naming of teachers by their last names resembles the manner in which junior employees are addressed by their manager. In Korean work places, senior people occasionally address their junior staff as Mr./Ms. along with their last name. Addressing an unmarried female employee as Miss with last name could be thought of as rude and even sexist in companies (Y. Lee 2006; Ok 2000). This accidental overlap between the two languages could potentially undermine the KETs’ power and authority in the L2-only context.

In sum, when students are allowed to call their KETs’ last name in English with honorific titles, the teachers may experience uneasiness due to the possible loss of face in front of the young learners in L2-only instruction. In the Korean milieu, this greeting in English may run the risk of transforming KETs from honored teachers into the fragile status of non-native English speakers (NNESs) similar to that of students.
2) Peer Culture in L2-only EFL Classrooms

Previous research in educational psychology (e.g., Kinney 1993; Luthar & McMahon 1996) has reported that peer culture regulates high school students’ behavior in classrooms and this is perhaps a worldwide phenomenon. In Korean contexts, however, this is of particular importance given that students stay mainly in their homeroom classrooms unless they go to music, visual art, and physical education classrooms. Korean students’ stationing in one classroom often creates strong group solidarity and causes ostensibly passive attitude toward class participation in order to save their face. It is perceived that in answering a question from their teacher, students take the risk of being wrong or revealing their low English proficiency. The students’ low-profile attitude could also be related to the group solidarity and inappropriateness of shining, often in the guise of modesty, in front of one’s classmates. For instance, if a pupil asks or answers an inquiry by the teacher in English class, this will be viewed by the student’s peers as showing <pride and the student may become an outcast (C.-W. Park 2000).

A related cultural feature of student behavior is their excessively collaborative attitudes in classroom interaction (Bond 1986, 1991). Although students do not want other students to outshine them in their classes, neither do they want them to underperform nor lose face in front of peers or the teacher. The students’ excessively collaborative attitudes can lead to active peer assistance in EFL classes in East Asia with its Confucian tradition (Son 2006). Flowerdew and Miller (1995) give a vivid picture of Chinese students’ mutual assistance. They report that Chinese learners are so engaged in full-fledged peer support that they even appear to be inattentive to their lecturers and chatter too much in class.

4) Cheng (2000), however, claims that the causes for the pupils’ passivity could be situation-specific rather than culturally pre-set. Cheng offers the situation-specific factors such as teachers' teaching methodologies and learners' language proficiency.

2. Code-switching in L2-only EFL Classrooms

Despite the fact that almost everyone can agree on the importance of using the target language in L2 teaching, there are two major positions on how much L2 is appropriate in the EFL context. One position is that it is best to use the target language exclusively or maximally (Cook 2001; MacDonald 1998; Turnbull 2001; van Lier 1995). Cook (2001) and van Lier (1995), for instance, state that for classroom teachers the maximal use of L2 means that they avoid or restrict it to very limited use. Regarding the use amount of L2 in the L2-only classes, Liu et al. (2004) indicate that the ratio considered by KETs to be the most desirable amount for L2-only instruction is 88%, compared to 53% by their students.

The other position is that L2-only instruction has negative effects on both students and teachers from pedagogical and historical perspectives, so that the native language can be used when necessary. Previous studies highlight the limitations of L2-only classes (Canagarajah 1999; Cook 2001) and the benefits of bilingual English instruction (Auerbach 1993; S.-Y. Kim 2002; Y.-A. Lee 2006; Wigglesworth 2002). For example, Y.-A. Lee (2006) argues for an eclectic use of code-switching from L2 to L1 if the limited L2 oral competence of non-native English teachers constrains their pedagogical options. In the same vein, Auerbach (1993) reports that 80% of the ESL educators allow their students to use L1 at times, and argues that the side effects of the strong L2-only in-class policy makes the teachers feel guilty and view themselves as failures or aberrations for not reinforcing it.

S.-A. Kim (2002) views L2-only instruction from the critical perspective. By using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, she asked 48 teachers and 102 middle school students about their perceptions on L2-only instruction. While both the teachers and students moderately agreed with the need for TETE, all of them strongly opposed the exclusive use of L2 in the TETE classes. The means for the answers by the KETs and middle school learners on the necessity of code-switching were 4.52 and 3.95 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), respectively. As S.-Y. Kim (2002) states, KETs need to use...
English (L2) maximally, but with judicious use of the students' Korean (L1).

V. Methods

1. Research Questions

In dealing with the Korean EFL academic culture in the context of L2-only classes, this study investigates the sociocultural features affecting the attitudes and behaviors of KETs and their students. We deal with the cultural features that appear in the L2-only classes and affect the KETs' disempowerment in L2-only classes. Therefore, we present four specific research questions:

1) When students call their KETs' last name along with Mr./Ms. in L2-only classes, how does the labeling practice in English affect the teacher's classroom management?
2) Is peer pressure as peer culture identified in L2-only classes in Korea?
3) Is excessive collaboration as peer culture identified in L2-only classes in Korea?
4) When do the KETs need to code-switch from L2 to L1 in L2-only classes for their empowerment?

2. Participants and Contexts

The participants were 207 male students from six different classrooms of the 11th grade, in a high school in Seoul and the first author taught all of them. The students were in either a humanities or science division, and their average age was 18 years old. Students in four classrooms took an English Conversation course, one took English 1, and the other took English Reading.

It was June when the students got involved in this study, and were quite familiar with the L2-only class because they had started to take it since March. They tended to perceive speaking in English as an essential language skill, but their oral proficiency could be considered novice-mid based on the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines (Hwang 2008).

The first author (Hwang) is the teacher described and analyzed in this study. Owing to his affiliation at a boys' high school, he chose to study male students' classes. He is a 41 year-old teacher/researcher with eleven year experience in teaching EFL in Korea, and with confidence in classroom management in both Korean and English. The teacher/researcher uses code-switching strategy when his classroom management is at risk during classes.

In terms of his English language competence, he had a fairly high overall English proficiency in that his overall English proficiency ranges above 230 in computer-based test (CBT) version of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and acquired 99.76 percentile rank in Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). As for oral proficiency, he did not experience any difficulty in supporting three native English speakers at his school as a main co-teacher for one and a half year, and stayed for a year in the U.S. The first author participated in more than 400 hours of teacher training programs aimed
for TETE by SMOE. He has also gained extensive research experience while completing a doctoral course in applied linguistics.

In this research, he took part in participant observation and data collection. In Korean EFL high school classrooms, the students are instructed mostly in Korean for the following plausible reasons: the emphasis on the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), students’ low proficiency (L.-J. Jeon 2008; J.-H. Lee 2007), and efficacy in L1 instruction (Cook 2001; Turnbull 2001). The KEI’s focus on teaching reading comprehension and test-taking techniques for the CSAT preparation in L1 (Min 2008).

3. Data Analysis

This study consisted of a qualitative, classroom-based, action research, defined as “the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice” (Wallace 1998: 1). According to Allwright (1983), the purpose of classroom-based research is to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers come together. The basic tenet of data analysis in this paper is not a simple description of the data collected, but a focus on the process by which the researchers can bring interpretations to the data (Powney & Watts 1987). The researchers adopted interpretive discourse analysis in order to describe and interpret the recorded data.

For data collection, six classes were observed over a three-month period as an emic account of the classroom by the first author. Out of the six classes, three of the representative classrooms were chosen for both video- and audio-taping by the first author while writing self-reflective journals on his English classes via the retrospective verbal protocol. Then the three authors transcribed the recorded discourses that became the baseline data (Allwright & Bailey 1991), and started to draw on any patterns pertinent to the cultural features in the L2-only classes for investigator triangulation (Denzin 1970). For the discourse analysis, the data, including Korean utterances, were translated into English in square brackets. The transcription was based on the transcription conventions by Atkinson and Heritage (1984) (see Appendix). The data presented were validated with methodological triangulation (Denzin 1970): previous literature review, transcribed discourses, and teacher’s self-reflective journal entries. Since the data dealt with a confined case, they should not be interpreted as general trends or decisive causality (Duff 2008). Rather, by reporting specific or even seemingly anecdotal excerpts, we intend to raise the readers’ awareness of implicit cultural norms and values and how such values are (mis)interpreted by the members of the school community.

VI. Findings

1. Calling Teachers’ Last Name in English

Unlike many Western nations, greetings are perceived to be important both to the teacher and the students. Usually, a class leader initiates unanimous choral greetings, to which the teacher responds. Greetings mark the beginning and end of each class, which means that these are repeated twice for each class hour (i.e., 50 minutes). In this section, we report on students’ calling teachers by their last name in English, and how the students become maladapted by this novel practice.

Excerpt 1 illustrates the case at the beginning of the L2-only class. Students had been taking this class for two months with their teacher. In Korean EFL classrooms, it is still uncommon or even rude to call the teacher by his or her last name in English using Mr. or Ms. It is considered a taboo for students to call their teacher’s name in Korean EFL norms and values. As stated above, the taboo is related to the Confucian teaching that teachers are on a par with students’ fathers. Therefore, it is quite natural for Korean students to bow to their teachers in a choral greeting ‘annyeonghasnikka (good morning/afternoon/evening, or how are you, sir?)’ as a pious ritual at the beginning of the class. In Excerpt 1, students seem elevated and equal to their teacher in terms of power by calling their teachers by their last name.
On the contrary, Teacher Reflection 1 displays that the teacher wonders if his choice of L2 for greeting shrinks his power and influence. Even though ‘Mr. Hwang’ is a rough translation of Hwang Seonseongnim [teacher] into English, the connotation of the L2 honorific title Mr. to a senior person is not equivalent to that of the original phrase in terms of the Confucian hierarchial values. Hence, the teacher appears to be bothered by the fact that his adolescent students seem to enjoy their new power granted somewhat unexpectedly and even ventured to challenge their teacher. The teacher then struggled to restore his power by shouting ‘be quiet’ and used avoidance strategy for the L2 greeting. This embarrassment could lead the teacher to ponder if he loses his face as seonseongnim [teacher] due to the way he is greeted in the L2 culture.

Excerpt 1: English Conversation in Classroom A
(at the beginning of the class)
T: Good morning, everyone(?)
Ss: Good morning, Mr. Hwang(?) (students start to chuckle)
T: (confused) Please be quiet(!)
Ss: (keep laughing and look at other friends) Yes, Mr. Hwang(.) (again laugh)
T: 조용히 해 [Everyone be quiet](!)

Teacher Reflection 1
I decided to let my students say ‘Good morning, Mr. Hwang’ instead of the usual ‘Good morning, teacher’, because I thought by having them call me by my last name would establish a positive rapport with my students. But, I never expected this kind of sudden sense of powerlessness once I allowed my students to say ‘Mr. Hwang’ in place of getting them to bow to me or greet me in the traditional choral greeting ‘안녕하십니까 [good morning/afternoon/evening, or how are you, sir?]’ at the beginning of the classes. My students, plausibly silent adolescents, are actually eager to find any and every chance to play psychological cat-and-mouse games with me. Since this classroom seems to be enjoying the power shift more than other classrooms that are relatively indifferent to the subtlety, I greet them less frequently in L2.

Compared to Excerpt 1, where an episode in a TETE classroom is presented, Excerpt 2 (Teaching English in Korean) shows that students appear very quiet and even docile in terms of mood in the same teacher’s classroom. In this conventional greeting format, students seem to be ready to cooperate and be obedient. Teacher Reflection 2 explains that the teacher feels glad to see his students trying to stop making noise and listen to their teacher.

Excerpt 2: English Conversation in Classroom B
(at the beginning of the class)
Class leader: 빨래, 경례 [Attention(? bow.)]
Ss: 안녕하십니까 [Good morning(?)] (students bow and start to get serious)
T: 안녕하십니까 [Good morning(?)] (looking around) 희장, 오늘 결석한 사람 있나
[OK class leader, is anyone absent today(?)]
Class leader: 없습니까 [No.] sir

Teacher Reflection 2
When I greet the students in Korean at the beginning of the class, students pay attention to me. The class procedure looks teacher-centered, but it is easy to get the students focused on the lectures.

Overall, the two excerpts contrast the phenomena in the L2 and L1 greetings. Although the class greeting ritual is one of many factors in L2-only class dynamics, the choice of language for greeting seems to affect the students’ behaviors and attitudes towards their teacher in English classes. To many KETs, the Western-style greeting could infringe on the usual Korean sociocultural climate between teachers and their students in English classes.

2. Group Solidarity and Peer Pressure

Excerpt 3 introduces a case on the group solidarity and peer pressure. As
one student (S1) uses the target language fluently, his friends show a sign that he is getting assimilated into the L2 culture. His peer’s exclamation could be perceived as cultural pressure to the individual who wanted to attend the L2 class actively. Because of this group cohesiveness, students given a question in L2-only classes usually answer in L1 rather than L2.

Excerpt 3: English Reading in Classroom B

T: Can I have a volunteer who wants to read Page 101?
S1: (raises his hand)
T: OK, [S1’s name]
S1: Sir what page?
Other Ss: (in a choral nice) Wow! Wow!

Excerpt 4 also proves that students feel compelled to speak only in L1 even in L2-only classes because of the group solidarity and peer pressure. In Excerpt 4, one student (S2) with a robust language identity keeps responding in L1 although S2’s teacher imposes L2 on him. S2 requests code-switching into L1 to the teacher first, and the teacher explains the concept of identity in Korean in the next turn. In the middle of the conversation, another student (S3) gives in under the cultural feature of the group solidarity, and puts more burden on his teacher to change the medium of instruction into L1.

Excerpt 4: English Conversation in Classroom C

T: Do you think learning English weakens your identity as a Korean?
S2: 선생님, 무슨 말인가요 아이러니타기 쉬워요 한국말로 해주세요. (Teacher.) I don’t understand what you’re saying. I don’t understand what the word identity means. (Please say it in Korean.)
T: 정의를 해주면 한국인의 정체성을 안화시킨다고 생각하시나. [S2’s name], do you think learning English weakens your identity as a Korean?
S2: 그런테 정체성이 뭐해요. [By the way what does an identity mean?]
S3: 담임 선생님이 입었어요 우리 반 아이들이 국어부터 정체아 한테요. [My homeroom teacher said.] we have to master the Korean language first.

T: 오. 그래서야 [Oh, really?]

Teacher Reflection 3, with regard to both Excerpts 3 and 4, offers KETs’ difficulties in interacting with students in L2-only classes. Even though the teacher is aware of the students’ solidarity and prevailing peer pressure, he seems helpless in changing the situation. The teacher is left in a powerless position because the problem is related to the cultural features of the classroom ambiance, which he cannot change easily.

Teacher Reflection 3

S1 volunteered to read a question and even asked me a question back in English. I was really glad to get one student to come out of the group solidarity circle even at the risk of jeopardizing himself as the teacher’s pet and becoming a potential outcast in the classroom. No wonder that other envious students booed him with the tone of respect as well as ridicule. Among students, there exists a powerful peer pressure.

3. Students’ Excessively Collaborative Approach to Peer Assistance

As stated in the Literature Review, Korean high school students’ peer culture is linked with Confucian values, which has both positive and negative effects on Korean students. The peer pressure illustrated in the previous section is a negative aspect, but positive aspects also exist. In Excerpt 5, an instance of collaborative approach among students is reported. When the teacher asks one student (S4) about the weather outside, he cannot answer the question instantly. Then his friends make fun of him but at the same time, they struggle to help him out. Out of the group solidarity, S4’s friends are willing to get involved in their friend’s mishap. The students’ excessive involvement annoys the teacher. While the teacher expects only one student to work on his assigned question, the students act collectively in solving their friend’s problem, leaving the teacher to suspect that he is disempowered by the students’ commotion.
Excerpt 5: English Conversation in Classroom D

T: What's the weather like outside?
S4: [student given the question is still murmuring and the other students are laughing and chuckling because of their classmate's stammering]
Ss: [huh, huh, heh, huh]
Ss: Come on! Come on.
T: Is it sunny or cloudy?
Ss: Cloudy. (the other students are answering the question)
T: [S4's name] Is it sunny or cloudy?
S4: It's cloudy.
Ss: [You should say] Cloudy. Cloudy. It's really cloudy. [That's the answer.]
T: Gentlemen! Don't interrupt! Okay? I'm talking to [S4's name]. The rest of the people should be patient! So, let me ask you a question! [S4's name] [S4's name]! What's the weather like outside?
S4:Alternatively Cloudy.

Teacher Reflection 4 describes his confusion about the students' different behaviors. At an individual level, they are extremely reticent and docile. Yet, at a group level, they seem blatant and mischievous. The flow of his L2-only classes appears to be blocked by the students' intervention leading to the teacher's disciplining of the students. When disciplining in L2, the teacher finds himself slow and awkward in using the disciplinary language. It seems that it may take more time for the teacher to get used to rowdy classes and to accurately decipher the meaning of his students' dual reactions.

Teacher Reflection 4

It was annoying to see students enjoy interfering in one student's problems when I asked him a question. Most of the other students' help was conveyed in a mixture of English and Korean. Even though my students are mostly reticent and passive, they began to get more excited and acted out through collective involvement in their friend's predicament. I ended up punishing some of the students for interrupting my conversation with the particular student since I viewed their behavior as being impolite. I tried to restrain the fellow students' over-intervention with S4 in fear that their constant glossing in either Korean or English could ruin this L2-only environment and function as strenuous peer pressure to impose Korean (L1) throughout the class.

4. Teacher's Code-switching to Regain Power

In Excerpt 6, the teacher decides to regress to L1 when he assesses that the situation is hard to manage in L2 in spite of his reiterative trials, and seems to think that he has failed to control the class. Students' bowing at the very beginning of the classes instead of saying good afternoon gave more power to the teacher because bowing in a classroom setting means more than merely saying hello in Korean EFL academic culture. When students in Korean culture bow to their teacher, it means that they accept the teacher as a more powerful and authoritative figure. As shown in Excerpt 6, the teacher wants to exercise his power on the students at the very beginning of the class by having them greet him in chorus. Hence, the teacher can manage his class easily with code-switching to L1 from L2.

Excerpt 6: English Conversation in Classroom B

T: Good afternoon, everyone!
Ss: (no answers, paying no attention to the teacher and making big noises)
T: Good afternoon, everybody! Good afternoon, everybody!
Ss: (no answers, keep having disorder)
T: (gets disturbed and shouts) [You, Class leader]!
Class Leader: [You, Class leader]!
Ss: (stop making noises, start to be attentive, and bow to their teacher) 안녕하십니까 [Good afternoon]!
T: Is anyone absent?
In this excerpt, after recognizing students’ inattentive attitudes at the beginning of the class, the teacher deliberately switches to L1 mode of greeting, which accompanies the traditional kinesthetic decorum of bowing. The verbal expression and bodily gestures symbolize well-established unequal power structure between the teacher and the students. The skillful code-switching makes each student realize their socially-imposed respect for teacher. In the last turn in Excerpt 6, the teacher returns to L2 after confirming his authority for class management purposes.

VII. Discussion

The imposition of L2-only instruction to Korean EFL classrooms is more than a value-neutral introduction of an innovative foreign language policy. In essence, the question of language choice is, as Auerbach (1993) puts it, a question of ideology leading to power negotiation among the language users. Therefore, the exclusive use of the L2 might disempower teachers from the perspective of the Korean EFL academic culture.

This article presented four cases of group dynamics in the L2-only lectures leading to the KETs’ disempowerment in Korean EFL classroom culture: students’ naming practices, group solidarity, excessively collaborative approach to peer assistance, and the teacher’s code-switching. The figure above is a conceptual representation of how the KETs’ L2 initiation and the students’ responses lead to the teachers’ disempowerment in Korean EFL cultural norms and values. The four cases account for the group dynamics of the teacher’s and students’ behavior in the L2-only lectures. Given that one’s name is always realized through multiple social interactions (T.-Y. Kim 2007), the subtle change by translation and insertion of the teacher’s last name ‘Mr. Hwang’ from the traditional ‘annyeonghasibnikka [good morning/afternoon/evening, or how are you, sir?]’ may have a strong impact on the social structure of power between the teachers and students. This is because the ‘Good morning, Mr. Hwang!’ greeting leads the students to violate two classroom practices in Korea. The first practice is that students rarely put Seonsaengnim [teacher] in front of the choral greeting statements in the Korean academic culture. The second practice violated is that the students never call a teacher by his/her last name along with the classroom greeting at the beginning of classes in L1. Thus, the students transgress two established practices in Korean classrooms and are thereby elevated to the same position as their teacher, which leads to the teacher’s subjective sense of disempowerment.

As illustrated in Excerpts 3 and 4, the students’ group solidarity functions as peer pressure and negatively affects the KETs’ power. This cultural feature suggests that the lecture-style class setting and a fixed classroom system, in which the students rarely move to their home classroom, need to be modified in order to lower the peer pressure emerging from the student’s group solidarity. The recent introduction of a ‘level-based instruction’ program in Korea could be one of the alternatives to the students’ collateral inhibition of active participation in communicative L2-only classes. This is because the intense group solidarity as exemplified in Excerpts 3 and 4, could be alleviated when the students move to other classrooms and are divided based on their proficiency level.

Students’ collective approach to peer assistance, compared with the above two phenomena, seems to have a positive effect as well. The students’
collaborative approach can increase their sense of learner autonomy (cf. Benson 2001). This student-initiated approach has the potential to be transformed into peer feedback toward other students. Explaining the conditions of autonomous learning, Kohonen (1992) argues that learning contents will not "become part of the individual's frame of reference unless they have been experienced meaningfully on a subjective emotional level." (p. 17). The situation described in Excerpt 5 will certainly be considered as a mishap from the student's viewpoint. However, this can function as a significant moment of subjective emotional learning, which will lead into a deeper level of learning. Upon the provision of scaffolding from peer students, the vivid experience of being designated by the teacher and trying to provide an answer to the teacher's question has a relatively long positive effect on the student's autonomy and motivation. Regarding this, T.-Y. Kim (2006b) uses the term, sensitization, where “an L2 learner recognizes the gap between his or her current L2 proficiency and the desirable L2 proficiency to be attained” (p. 65). He argues that sensitization occurs when learners have L2 experiences with personal meaning to them. L2 learning is the most effective when an L2 learner has a specific L2 learning goal and belief, and when the learner is surrounded by others who are willing to give assistance. Given this, the students' collaborative approach, as long as they have good intentions to provide timely assistance, can enhance students' sensitization and learner autonomy. In such occasions, teachers can take the role of a counselor who checks the appropriateness and the amount of L2 in the classes.

It seems that the group dynamics in the L2-only classes may negatively affect the KETs' vocational identity. In L2-only classes, when students continuously respond in L1, the KETs often think that their students are disrespecting them because it was the teacher who mandated the L2-only class policy and the students violate the class rule. As shown in Excerpt 4, in the L2-only classes, tension exists between teachers and students, because the teachers are the enforcers of the L2 and the students in their late teens are the ones resisting the teachers' L2 imposition. In the climate of escalating tension, the KETs are likely to feel alienated from their students since they are the only ones struggling to stick to the L2 while their students defy speaking in the L2. Even when the L2-only class policy is strictly enforced, the English mode of greeting disrupts the KETs' fragile vocational identity. As illustrated in the English name calling episode in Excerpt 1, teachers may think that they lose face in L2-only classes if the traditional social status is not preserved by the students in their late teens in the saying of Mr. or Ms. with their last name. Therefore, the strict adherence to L2-only classes seems to diminish the KETs' sense of class management and threatens their vocational identity from a respected member of Korean society to one of the NNESs, which is not different from their students.

VIII. Suggestions and Implications

The present study has described how the KETs' power shifted in the L2-only classrooms where the imposition of L2 could collide with the academic cultural values of L1. In order to adopt the communicative language teaching via L2-only instruction, Korean society needs to make a fundamental change to English education, with a more diverse approach rather than 'all or nothing' views (Dash 2002). The educational reform should be gradual and grounded in Korea-specific EFL situations. We need to take Korean-specific, cultural sensitivities into consideration when implementing L2-only policy in English classrooms: L2-only classes should not be interpreted as being literally 100 percent English-only classes. This interpretive case study suggests that due to educational necessity, KETs could benefit from minimal, eclectic use of L1 in order to manage their classes effectively. Even though the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology has emphasized in-service education for English teachers, the teacher training emphasizes training the KETs' English proficiency and teaching methodologies (Min 2008), and does not examine the subtle cultural differences which each KET may encounter in the TETE classroom. In this sense, this study sheds light on the needs for teacher training in intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997) for TETE.
The study has some limitations, primarily the small size of the data that were based on only one regional, Seoul-based high school. The data of this study may not represent typical practices of a KETs' power shift, the aspect of the KETs' language imposition, and disciplining in L2-only instruction. In addition, this study was based on one teacher's reflective perception of the empowerment, and students' interpretations of potential cultural (dis)empowerment were not investigated.\(^8\)

Further studies are needed to scrutinize both the micro and macro issues of English teachers' challenges in L2-only classes in Northeast Asian countries that share Confucian values to varying degrees. Methodologically, the Confucian cultural features in the research questions can be further investigated through the lens of quantitative research orientations. Other psychological constructs such as language identity along with culture and power could be investigated in future research on the challenges of L2-only classes. Furthermore, more studies are required to investigate the KETs' L2 self images and their teaching motivations (Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009) in implementing L2-only instruction.

References


\(^8\) However, the fact that students' accounts for the same phenomena were not included does not downgrade the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba 1985) of the study. The interpretation of the study was triangulated by utilizing class observation, teacher's reflective journal, and literature review.


Appendix

Transcription Conventions
(adapted from Atkinson & Heritage, 1984)

1. unfilled pauses or gaps - periods of silence, timed in tenths of a second by counting 'beats' of elapsed time. Micropauses, those of less than .2 seconds, are symbolized (.); longer pauses appear as a time within parentheses: (.) is five tenths of a second.
2. colon (:) - a lengthened sound or syllable; more colons prolong the stretch.
3. dash (-) - a cut-off, usually a glottal stop.
4. hhh - an inhalation; hhh! - strong inhalation.
5. hhh - exhalation; hhh! - strong exhalation.
6. hah, huh, heh, huh - all represent laughter, depending on the sounds produced. all can be followed by an (!), signifying stronger laughter.
7. (hhh) - breathiness within a word.
8. punctuation: markers of intonation rather than clausal structure: a period (.) is falling intonation, a question mark (?) is rising intonation, a comma (,) is continuing intonation. A question mark followed by a comma (,?) represents rising intonation, but is weaker than a (?). An exclamation mark (!) is animated intonation.
9. brackets ([ ]) - translation of Korean into English
10. Parenthesis - explanations of situation or non-verbal gestures

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