

# Cultural Awareness of Native English Teachers Who Work at Regular Kindergartens in Korea

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## 한국 유치원에서 근무하는 원어민 영어교사의 문화 인식

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**Abstract** Korean National Level Kindergarten Curriculum does not include English education in regular class time. On the other hand, more than 90% kindergarteners are taught English. This study examined the Native English Teachers' (NETs') cultural aspects of their teaching at regular kindergartens in Korea. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with four NETs who were working at regular kindergartens in Korea, their partner Local English Teachers (LETs) and kindergarten principals. All interview data was transcribed and categorized based on the grounded theory method. The results showed that NETs are not required to be culturally prepared to teach in Korean kindergartens. Consequently, most of them do not consider the students' culture in their teaching activities. Moreover, Korean kindergartens, where research participants work, are not prepared well to invite NETs into their regular curriculum. These results will have significant implications on Korean kindergarten's English education practice.

**요약** 국가 수준의 교육과정인 누리과정에서는 유아를 대상으로 한 영어교육을 고려하지 않고 있다. 그러나 현실에서는 90%이상의 유아들이 영어를 배우고 있다. 이 연구는 한국의 정규 유치원에서 영어를 가르치는 원어민 영어교사의 교수활동의 문화적 측면을 분석하였다. 이 연구를 위한 자료는 정규 유치원의 원어민 영어교사, 한국인 영어교사와 유치원 원장의 인터뷰를 통해 수집되었다. 모든 인터뷰 자료들은 근거 이론에 기반하여 전사하고 분류되었다. 연구 결과, 한국의 정규유치원에서는 원어민 영어교사들에게 한국의 유아들을 위한 문화적인 준비를 요구하지 않았다. 따라서, 대부분의 원어민 영어교사들은 자신의 교육활동에서 유아들의 문화를 고려하지 않고 있었다. 또한, 이 연구에 참여한 원어민 영어교사들이 근무하고 있는 한국 유치원들 역시 원어민 영어교사들의 교수활동을 정규 교육과정에 잘 통합하고 있지 못했다. 이러한 연구 결과들은 한국 유치원의 영어교육에 중요한 시사점을 제공할 것이다.

**Key Words** : kindergarten English education, English as foreign language, native English teacher, culturally relevant pedagogy, early English education

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid increase in cross-border economic, social, technological, and cultural exchange, for many countries globalization has become the most popular

agenda. Consequently individuals in these countries have to deal with its impact[1,2]. In the era of globalization, English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language in over one hundred countries, including China, Russia, Germany, Spain,

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Egypt and Brazil [3]. More than a billion people throughout the world are speaking to some extent English. Approximately 750 million people are either first or second-language speakers of English and an additional 250 million are actively learning to speak English as a foreign language. Given that the world's population passed the six billion mark in late 1999, approximately one fourth of the world's population is now capable of communicating in English at a functional level[3]. Due to the power, potential, and expectation that English performance can bring as well as its social and economic profits, many countries are interested in educating their children in English competence through schooling[4,5].

Even though globalization is a phenomenon and/or an ideology of the destruction of the barriers of distance and time, it is not a uniform and irreversible process[6-8,3,1]. In Korea, globalization has been understood as an international need for good standards. In Korea, the Kim Young Sam administration (1993-1997) initiated a nation-wide discourse about globalization and led a campaign for globalization. Koreans were thus made aware of the practical need knowing English as an international language[9-11]. Even though English was the mandatory and one of three important subject matters in Korean secondary education, it has been extensively taught to prepare a variety kind of written tests, such as college entrance tests, government official selection tests, attorney bar exam, etc. The main interests of the English tests, however, were to evaluate intellectual ability of the test takers rather than the level of the language proficiency of them.

With the globalization campaign, Korean English education faced two dramatic shifts. First, speaking took on greater emphasis than reading and grammar. To communicate effectively with English speakers, students sought private language academies that hired native English speaker tutors. Moreover, a trend toward early study abroad trend has [12,13]. Second, Koreans have rethought what age they should start

learning English[14]. Korean national curriculum that regulated both public and private schools did not include English in elementary level. This has led the grade level that starts offering English to be lowered first from seventh grade to third grade (in 1997) and now to first grade (in 2008). Most Korean parents believe that early exposure to English is an effective way to increase children's communicative abilities in English. Now, over 86% of kindergarten-aged Korean children attend kindergartens taught in English or take English as an extracurricular program of their kindergartens[15,16].

Because most Korean parents want their children speak English without accent, Native English-speaking teachers (NETs) are preferred for their authentic pronunciation. Parents want their children to have American accents even if they can speak only a few words. However, it is hard to find qualified NETs because there is not a big population of native English speakers in Korea. Hence, agencies invite native teachers from English speaking countries. They provide round-trip air tickets and housing in addition to monthly salaries that are usually double those of domestic-certified kindergarten teachers[17]. Some kindergarten principals go out to the street to find native teachers[18]. Most NETs, however, are not certified to teach because English education is not allowed in regular class time and NETs do not have proper working permits. Indeed, no working permit for NETs is available in Korea. According to Kim[19], only 11% NETs have early childhood education-related teaching certificates and 23% have English-related degrees. The rest of the teachers have degrees neither in education nor in English.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching is a term created by Gloria Ladson-Billings[20] to describe "a pedagogy that

empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17–18). Ladson-Billings uses culturally relevant teaching to explore how instruction supports and encourages students to access their prior knowledge through their cultural center to make sense of the world and to work toward improving it. Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain its cultural referents and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. Negative effects are brought on by not seeing one’s history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum, or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted. Even though the original culturally relevant teaching created by Ladson-Billings mainly focuses on urban African-American students, it has been applied to other groups of student (for example, students of multi-racial and - ethnic backgrounds[21] Because English and the culture of English has power as like they have dominant power in the U.S., it is expected that culturally relevant teaching gives us useful framework to investigate how NET’s cultural awareness affects effectively on their teaching.

This study aimed to investigate how NETs were aware of Korean culture and perceive that their teaching was effective for Korean kindergarten children and what were the challenges.

### 3. Research Method

This study examined the interview data with NETs and their partner LET and principals. As far as sampling method, the researchers chose convenience sampling for this study. Because English teaching was not allowed in kindergarten legitimately, English teachers, especially NETs were not easy to contact without private relationship.

#### 3.1 Data collection

One of the researchers of this study, Young Soon,

interviewed the research participants. Data were collected through in-depth interview with four NETs who were working at regular kindergartens in Korea (not Private English Academy for Kindergarteners, a.k.a. English kindergarten), their partner Local English Teachers (LETs) and kindergarten principals. The interviews with NETs were conducted in English but the rest of interviews with LETs and principals were done in Korean. The interviewer employed open-ended interviews in order to gather data. The interviews, however, were done based on the interview protocol. The interview protocol guided the interviewer to ask interviewees, but did not limit her not to ask further questions. Hence, the interviews were conducted as an open-ended conversation[22]. While the interview was being conducted, Young Soon took notes to capture themes emerging during the interview session. All of the interviews were conducted in a vacant space within their kindergartens.

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

The coding process followed the grounded theory method to identify themes emerging in interviews[23]. Audio files of the interviews were transcribed. Using a free computer software, Weft QDA, the transcribed data were coded. The researchers read the transcripts thoroughly several times before coding, then generated general categories using open code method. After the first coding process, the researchers tried to compare the codes and reorganized them. Even though the analysis process was basically relied on the intuition of the researcher, the computer program was useful to organize the codes.

#### 3.3 Validity and Reliability

Because this study was done as a qualitative research, the traditional concept of validity would not fit to this study. Especially, the generalization would not be possible to apply on it. The researchers, however, adapted triangulation of multiple view points by interviewing different types of interviewee; NETs,

LETs, and principals We also adapted triangulation of multiple sources: interview data, kindergarten's teaching plan, and diverse forms of documents. In addition to that, member checking has been done by the interviewees after the analysis.

#### 4. Finding: Discipline is a Matter

When NETs talked about their teaching, discipline was most frequently mentioned. Some told that their kindergartners were better than older students to control. All the NETs worked for their kindergartens part-time. They taught older students in "Hagwon," for-profit private institute, academy, or cram-school. Comparing to older students in Hagwon, kindergartners are much easier to control. Dan (pseudonym, one of the NETs that Young Soon interviewed; all participants' names appeared on this study are not real), reported:

Dan: Discipline and control is a major issue in Hagwon.  
But kindergarten is much better.

...

D: It is easy for me to teach in kindergarten. ...  
Hagwon is more difficult.

...

D: It's really hard for me. I can't control them. I can't understand them. What's wrong with me? And what's wrong with them? Sometimes, they do not listen to you.

Young Soon: So, you don't have that kind of ...

D: Sometimes I do. But, kids are better.

(Transcript of Interview with Dan, pp. 6-7, interviewed on 6/29/2012)

However, Alison reported that she was happy with other teachers' assistance to control the class. When Young Soon asked Allison if she teach with other teachers at the same time, she answered:

...

Young Soon: Even though they don't teach with you at the same time, they are there

Allison: Yes, they are there and it's really nice.

Y: Are you O.K. with that? Don't you feel...

A: I appreciate it.

Y: Some may don't want the teachers see while they teach.

A: First time, I was little bit nervous... But it's fine. It's more helpful than anything else.

Y: You think their presence is helpful?

A: Yea. Especially for discipline. Because, sometimes it is hard for me to control the class.

(Transcript of Interview with Allison, pp. 11-12, interviewed on 6/28/2012)

Allison had not been happy with other teachers' presence while she was teaching at first. However, she came to appreciate for their presence because they are helpful in controlling the class. The data analysis revealed three reasons why discipline does matter with NETs.

#### 4.1 Communication

It is difficult for NETs to communicate with kindergarten children unless they speak Korean. Allison explains that one of roles of LET is translator for NETs. When I asked her if she can teach without LETs, she replied:

Allison: I think it's important, the Korean English teacher for native English teacher as a link.

Young Soon: As a link between you and kindergarten?

A: Yea. She communicates to "Wonjangnim" (principal of kindergarten) and other teachers and the students often. So, she's kind of translating. She is doing it for us.

Y: Kind of your agent?

A: Yea, really important. I mean maybe I can survive without her, but hardly.

(Transcript of Interview with Allison, p. 20, interviewed on 6/28/2012)

As Allison states above, she thinks that LET helps her to communicate with her students and other teachers. However, Gloria's case is much different. She is a Korean-American who came to Korea four years ago. When she was here first, she did not speak Korean well. But, she says her Korean is fluent now.

Young Soon: You may understand better what's going on in the class because they speak Korean in your class. You may understand more than other native English teachers.

Gloria: Yea, that's an advantage. And I listen to what Korean teachers say. And I do the same things, sometimes. So, it helps. But I still sty to speak in English. But I know what's going on. I understand what they are saying.

(Transcript of Interview with Allison, p. 7, interviewed on 6/29/2012)

As a bilingual, Gloria's Korean ability helps her to communicate effectively with her children.

#### 4.2 Motivation

Discipline is a central issue among the NETs because kindergarten children do not pay much attention to the English lessons of the NETs. When the NETs were asked how they teach the children, all of them said that they used songs and nursery rhymes.

Gloria: I use nursery rhymes and songs...

Young Soon: Where did you get them?

G: On Naver (Korean internet portal site), there are a lot of songs for kids, "Five little monkeys" and etc.

Y: Don't you use Korean melodies?

G: Do we make our songs? I don't know.

(Transcript of Interview with Gloria, p. 14, interviewed on 6/29/2012)

Even though Gloria speaks Korean fluently and knows Korean culture more than any other NETs of this study, she does not use Korean songs for her

lessons. On the other hand, Allison makes some songs for her class.

Young Soon: What kind of song do you sing in your class? Traditional songs? Or do you make by yourself?

Allison: New ones. I have a good old friend, Korean English teacher in a kindergarten. She taught me, actually she was doing it with her students and her nephew. One little, two little, three little "Hoppangmen (Japanese cartoon character)," (laughing), four little, five little, six little Supermen, seven little, eight little, nine little Batmen, and ten little Spidermen, chrrr (sound of shooting spider web) (Transcript of Interview with Allison, p. 25, interviewed on 6/28/2012)

Even though she does not use Korean melodies neither, Allison uses Korean cultural stuff (Hoppangman) which is fun and familiar to Korean children. These would be effective to draw children's attention.

After analysing the data, we, the authors, come to know that the NETs use less Korean cultural stuffs than that of the U.S. or U.K.. Consequently, it is one of the reasons that Korean children lose their attention in the class with NETs.

#### 4.3 Unorganized program

The English lesson programs led by NETs are not organized well. They seem to be more focusing on just experiencing native English speaker than learning English itself. When Gloria was asked about advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual, she spend most time to complain how she has been treated differently after she speak Korean fluently. Korean mothers do not consider her as a native English speaker any more and they prefer European teacher more than her even though her European co-worker has Russian accent.

Moreover, the class time is too short. The average

class time of all the NETs is about 20 minutes per week. Definitely it is too short for the students learn a new language. Some kindergartens have extra English class with LETs. However, some interviewees complained that LETs' English ability is too low. They told that many LETs' cannot communicate with others in English.

In addition to that, all the NETs of this study choose and plan their own program without any support from the kindergarten. Kindergarten principals do not ask NETs to coordinate their lessons with the kindergartens' regular program. Hence, the NETs do not know about Korean kindergarten curriculum. They plan their own programs independently.

## 5. Discussion

As kindergarten students learn the similarities and differences across first language and second language notions, they comprehend how some concepts are culturally and linguistically bound, and how other components are more universal and can be transferred across languages[24].

Therefore, they are able to connect these cultural similarities and differences while acquiring a second language. Cultural awareness of English teacher is extremely valuable when teaching kindergarten children. Indeed, because of cultural and language conflicts, kindergarten children are disconnected from the curriculum and classroom learning activities. Kindergarten children perceive themselves as being foreigners in their English lesson with NET. Culturally relevant teaching provides a framework for NETs to meet the cultural needs of kindergarten children in Korea and to better support the children's participation in classroom activities, thereby enhancing English language acquisition. Teachers should value their students' cultural resources, familiarize themselves with community they are teaching in, and encourage the children to work collaboratively with others to

accomplish tasks. Through the practice of culturally relevant teaching, kindergarten children are able to learn English and its culture more effectively.

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