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The Impersonal Theory of T. S. Eliot: Its Role in Poetry and Application in Korean EFL English Classrooms

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This study examines T. S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry and investigates how it can be applied to teaching English literature in Korean EFL university classrooms. The purpose of the research is to determine whether Eliot's view-namely that poetry should transcend personal emotion and instead emerge from tradition, form, and technique-can support Korean learners in developing deeper literary understanding and analytical competence. Using textual analysis of Eliot's key critical essays, including *The Sacred Wood* and *Selected Essays*, the study traces the evolution of his impersonal theory and identifies pedagogical principles relevant to EFL contexts. The analysis highlights how distancing the poet from personal emotion encourages students to read poems as crafted textual objects rather than autobiographical expressions. The findings suggest that applying Eliot's theory in the classroom enables students to focus on poetic structure, technique, and intertextuality, thereby strengthening critical thinking and reducing reliance on subjective interpretation. Practical instructional strategies grounded in Eliot's concepts-such as guided analysis of form, comparison with traditional models, and discussion of the poet's role as a mediator-are proposed. The study concludes that integrating Eliot's impersonal theory can enhance literary comprehension among Korean EFL learners and warrants further cross-cultural investigation.

[T. S. Eliot/impersonal theory/EFL/literary teaching/critical thinking]

I. INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot's reputation as a major critic and poet began with his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", where he outlined the foundations of his critical theory and

established his significant influence on modern literary criticism. In this essay, Eliot (1920) recognizes that his work is indebted to tradition and sets in motion the process of reevaluating English poets. Notably, Eliot's development of the theory of impersonality marks a pivotal departure from the romantic traditions of English poetry. In this paper, impersonality refers to Eliot's assertion that the poet must suppress individual emotion and belief in favor of objective expression shaped by literary tradition and aesthetic form. This does not imply the absence of belief, but rather its transformation into poetic structure. In his essay, he articulates how this theory forms a critical break with the personal expression that characterized the romantic poets, thus redefining the role of the poet in relation to the art of poetry (Eliot, 1920).

Although Eliot's impersonality theory has been the subject of considerable critical discussion, prior research has largely concentrated on its philosophical or aesthetic implications. Allan (1984) interprets Eliot's impersonality as a response to the fragmentation of modern identity, while Austin (1974) connects it to Eliot's theological concerns, particularly his engagement with Anglican tradition. Lu (1967), on the other hand, analyzes Eliot's rhetorical strategies in suppressing the lyrical self in his poetry. While these studies provide important insights into Eliot's literary vision, they primarily focus on philosophical, theological, or rhetorical dimensions. Allan (1984) interprets impersonality as a response to modern identity crisis, Austin (1974) emphasizes its theological underpinnings, and Lu (1967) analyzes rhetorical suppression of the lyrical self. However, none of these studies explore the pedagogical utility of Eliot's theory in EFL contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by linking Eliot's impersonality theory with instructional strategies for Korean learners of English literature, thus providing a unique interdisciplinary contribution that merges literary theory and English education.

This study aims to address that gap by examining Eliot's impersonal theory through a combined lens of literary analysis and educational application. By doing so, it seeks to contribute a unique perspective on the relevance of Eliot's thought in literary pedagogy and to propose pedagogical strategies through which modernist poetic theory can be used to foster critical thinking and literary awareness among Korean EFL students.

Eliot (1920) explains his view as follows in his essay:

> The poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions significant to the man may take no place in the poetry, while those crucial to the poem may be negligible in the man. (p. 9)

This early essay remains one of Eliot's most distinguished works, as it succinctly articulates the key theoretical elements that would dominate his later critical writings. Among these, the theories of tradition and impersonality would shape not only his

subsequent literary criticism but also his poetic output.

The impersonal theory of poetry offers Eliot two distinct but related purposes. First, it provides a means to break away from the excessive personal emotion and individualism that had long dominated poetry, urging a move toward a transcendent, more objective form of art. Second, it offers a solution to the state of disintegration in poetry caused by the lack of unifying belief in the previous century, especially as the modern world grappled with the decline of faith and traditional values. These two purposes might initially seem contradictory, yet they reflect the same underlying issue: how to create a type of poetry suitable for a twentieth-century audience that has become increasingly rational and scientific in its worldview.

In this sense, Eliot suggests that impersonal art-detached from the artist's personality and emotional expression-is the key to poetry's relevance in the modern era. As he argues, only objective, impersonal art can be appreciated by modern individuals whose rational, scientific mindset has rendered personal expression less compelling (Eliot, 1920).

To explore this issue, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology that combines close textual analysis of Eliot's critical essays and representative poems with a pedagogical approach informed by EFL educational theory. Specifically, the analysis draws on "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "The Metaphysical Poets", and poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" (Eliot, 2001a, 2001b), focusing on how the theory of impersonality is enacted both conceptually and formally.

Furthermore, by applying principles from EFL pedagogy and intercultural education, this study develops instructional strategies that aim to help Korean English majors critically engage with Eliot's ideas in a culturally and linguistically accessible way.

When teaching T. S. Eliot's impersonal theory in an EFL classroom for Korean college English majors, it is crucial to simplify complex ideas without losing their critical essence. Given the linguistic and cultural differences, the theory should be introduced through clear explanations and concrete examples from Eliot's poetry, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" (Eliot, 2001a).

To engage students, interactive activities such as group discussions, critical debate, and comparative analysis with other literary traditions-such as Korean literature's focus on personal expression-can help students grasp the contrast between individualism and impersonality. Creative writing exercises, where students are tasked with composing poems that emphasize impersonal, universal themes rather than personal experience, can also facilitate deeper understanding.

These classroom applications are grounded in educational research that emphasizes critical literacy, intercultural competence, and literary engagement as core goals in literature education for language learners. This approach not only enhances students' comprehension of Eliot's theory but also encourages critical thinking about the role of the poet in the modern

world, while fostering cross-cultural perspectives on literary expression.

The pedagogical implications of this study thus extend beyond literary appreciation to broader educational objectives such as analytical reasoning, cultural awareness, and interpretive skills in a foreign language context.

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept and practice of Eliot's impersonal theory, a poetic belief that he consistently advocated in his critical writings and sought to implement in his own poetic creations. Through an analysis of Eliot's major critical essays, this study will examine the theoretical underpinnings of the impersonal theory and its practical application in the poet's work, considering how it reflects his broader critical agenda and his vision for the future of poetry. By further proposing pedagogical strategies for EFL learners, particularly in the Korean college context, this paper aims to contribute to the field of literature education by demonstrating how canonical literary theory can be made relevant and meaningful in cross-cultural language learning environments.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach based on literary analysis and pedagogical design. It combines close reading of Eliot's major critical and poetic works with an application of educational theories relevant to EFL teaching-particularly constructivism, task-based learning, and intercultural literary education. This hybrid method allows for the formulation of practical strategies aligned with the needs and characteristics of Korean university students.

II. THE IMPERSONAL THEORY IN ELIOT'S POETRY: A REFINED ARTISTIC PROCESS

Romantic poets regarded poetry as an expression of individuality, as exemplified by Wordsworth's claim that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." In contrast, T. S. Eliot articulated his theory of impersonality as follows: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (Eliot, 1920, p. 58).

In response to this assertion, Edmund Wilson criticized Eliot strongly, arguing that the claim-only those with personality and emotions can understand the desire to escape from them-is merely an excuse for lacking both personality and emotion (Wilson, 1931). However, such criticism appears unjust when Eliot's critical works, such as his analysis of Yeats, are taken into account.

Eliot (1920) explained his impersonality theory through a now-famous analogy of a chemical catalyst:

> When the two gases previously mentioned (oxygen and sulphur dioxide) are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is unaffected, has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (p. 7)

In this analogy, the poet's mind acts as a neutral medium through which emotion and feeling are transformed into art. Here, "emotion" refers to lived experience, while "feeling" represents the poetic aspects of language. What matters is not the intensity of the raw emotion but the intensity of the artistic process-the mental pressure that transforms these elements into something new and impersonal (Eliot, 1920). Thus, Eliot contends that poetic greatness is measured not by self-expression, but by the transformative pressure of composition (Eliot, 1920).

Austin (1974) described this process of artistic creation as involving three stages: "The fusion depends on (1) the emotions of the man who suffers, (2) the transforming power of the creative process, and (3) the fortunate critical moment-the concentration that produces the right combination of elements" (pp. 5-6).

According to Eliot (1920), the difference between a mature and an immature poet lies not in the depth of personality but in the ability to synthesize distinct emotions into a coherent whole. The goal is to ensure the objectivity of poetry by showing that poetic emotion emerges from a controlled synthesis, not a spontaneous release of personal feeling. This concept, which became a foundation of twentieth-century classical criticism, directly opposed the Romantic notion of the unconscious genius and the cult of personality. In the Victorian context-where poetic seriousness often emphasized emotional intensity-Eliot's theory was misunderstood and criticized. Critics like Winters (1943) and Ransom (1941) labeled Eliot a determinist, while Wilson (1931) dismissed him as a trivial aesthete. However, much of this criticism stemmed from a misreading of Eliot's rejection of *self-indulgent* personality, not of the self altogether.

To clarify this point, scholars such as Allan (1984) distinguished between "good personality" and "bad personality" (p. 118), and between "true impersonality" and "false impersonality" (p. 114). While the former elevates the personal to universal law, the latter collapses into conformity. Similarly, Lu (1967) viewed impersonality dialectically, arguing that Eliot's theory entails a transformation of the self, not its annihilation. Brian Lee even suggests that "true personality" and "true impersonality" may ultimately coincide.

Eliot (1934) further criticizes Romantic emotionalism in *After Strange Gods*:

> This extreme emotionalism seems to me a symptom of decadence; it is a cardinal point of faith in a romantic age, to believe that there is something admirable in violent emotion for its own sake, whatever the emotion or whatever its object. (p. 55)

His rejection of emotion for its own sake reiterates his core assertion that poetry is "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot, 1920, p. 10). However, in a 1959 letter to Ezra Pound, Eliot admitted that *After Strange Gods* expressed overly harsh and even anti-Semitic sentiments, and that it unfairly distorted his own views (Eliot, 1920), suggesting that he later distanced himself from the extremity of his early formulations.

Indeed, Eliot's stance on impersonality was never entirely rigid. As Smidt (1967) observed: "The words to be expressed here are retaining all the particularity of his experience. They are a far cry from the theories of 1919" (p. 43). This indicates that even in his most impersonal poetry, Eliot retained the specificity of personal experience. Some critics have likewise argued that impersonality is achieved not through emotional denial, but through the *objective correlative*-a technique for evoking emotion through precise imagery and form.

Ultimately, Eliot's impersonality theory aimed to move beyond Romanticism and articulate a poetic method suited to modernity. While he rejected raw emotionalism, he did not reject originality or subjectivity altogether. As he later wrote:

> For in an artist these suggestions made by a work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself. (Eliot, 1920, p. 6)

Thus, Eliot never intended to erase the self entirely. He believed that the artist's individuality must undergo a process of transformation-filtered through broad experience and poetic craft-to become truly artistic. He affirmed this in his writing on Shakespeare: "Shakespeare, too, was occupied with the struggle-which alone constituted life for a poet-to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal" (Eliot, 1920, p. 117).

In this context, Eliot acknowledges that personality and struggle are not antithetical to poetry; rather, they are the very materials from which universal and impersonal art can be forged. The theory of impersonality is, therefore, not a deterministic system, but a disciplined call for emotional objectification and aesthetic distance.

III. THE COMPLEXITY OF ELIOT'S RELIGIONS BELIEF AND ITS IMPACT ON HIS POETRY

The second aspect of Eliot's theory of impersonality concerns the problem of belief, and it emerges from his sustained engagement with the question of poetic personality. Eliot concluded that a poet's personality must remain under constant control to suppress the overflow of personal emotion. This led him to assert that even the poet's personal beliefs need not be directly expressed in great poetry. If great poetry is inherently impersonal, then the great poet must not only reject the intrusion of personal emotion but must also avoid disordering the poem through an overemphasis on personal beliefs (Eliot, 1933).

Eliot based this theory on the premise that the poet is not an original thinker. That is, his interest lies primarily in emotion as a poet, not in philosophy per se. "The poet who 'think' is merely the poet who can express the emotional equivalent of thought. But he is not necessarily interested in the thought itself" (Eliot, 1933, p. 115). He continues: "I believe that for a poet to be also a philosopher he would have to be virtually two men; I cannot think of any example of this thorough schizophrenia, nor can I see anything to be gained by it: the work is better performed inside two skulls than one" (Eliot, 1933, p. 90).

Whereas the philosopher is fundamentally interested in ideas, the poet is concerned with the emotional equivalents of ideas. If an individual aims to perform his role justly, he must focus on that which is his primary concern. Since the poet is not an original thinker, he does not necessarily need to believe what he uses in his poetry. Eliot (1933) observes "I doubt whether belief enters into the activity of a great poet (qua poet)" (p. 118).

The phrase "qua poet" warrants close attention here. Eliot does not mean that a poet, as a human being, should not believe in anything. Rather, because the poet is not an original thinker, he borrows the beliefs of thinkers. Just as Dante used the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in his poetry, whether or not the poet believes in the philosophy he employs is not aesthetically significant. As Eliot (1933) explains: "The Poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey, the spider secretes a filament; you can hardly say that any of these agents believes: he merely does" (p. 118).

If a poet need not believe in the ideas he uses, how then does he decide which beliefs or ideas to incorporate into his poetry? According to Eliot (1933), a great poet, in writing himself, inevitably records the philosophy of his own time: "The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time." (p. 117) The phrase *in writing himself* might seem somewhat awkward or inappropriate in this context. How can a poet write poetry without expressing his own beliefs? And if so, why is it necessary to "write his time"?

What Eliot means is that the poet uses the philosophy of his time-either as he perceives it or as he is influenced by it. However, he need not believe as his contemporaries do; he simply cannot escape being influenced by the intellectual currents of his era. If a poet fails to

incorporate the philosophy of his age, he will fail to produce great poetry. Eliot (1933) notes that Shakespeare lived in an age of moral confusion, filled with inferior philosophies. Had Shakespeare written under the influence of a "better" philosophy, he might have produced worse poetry. His task was to express the greatest emotional intensity of his age-drawing from anything that was intellectually significant at the time. Regardless of personal belief, the great poet must use the emotional force of the dominant philosophy of his time as the foundation of his poetry.

In discussing Dante's beliefs, Eliot (1932) remarked: "I have also asserted that we can distinguish between Dante's beliefs as a man and his beliefs as a poet. But we are forced to believe that there is a particular relation between the two, and that the poet means what he says" (p. 230). This distinction between the poet's beliefs as a human being and as a poet remains somewhat ambiguous. It appears that Eliot had already offered an early explanation of this difference: the poet uses the beliefs of his time.

The problem of poetic belief proved to be a considerable dilemma for Eliot. He not only had to confront whether a poet should believe in the philosophy he incorporates into his poetry, but also whether the reader needs to share the poet's beliefs in order to appreciate the poetry. Eliot (1933) argued that readers do not need to share the poet's beliefs in order to appreciate the poetry. This assertion clarifies his earlier claim that the poet need not believe in the philosophy he uses. If the poet does not need to believe in it, then neither does the reader.

Eliot developed a more nuanced and comprehensive theory of poetic belief in his essay on Dante. While defending Dante, he advanced the idea that readers do not have to believe in what Dante believed in order to appreciate his poetry:

> My point is that you cannot afford to ignore Dante's philosophical and theological belief, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but then on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself… For there is a difference (which here I hardly do more than assert) between philosophical belief and poetic assessment. (Eliot, 1932, p. 218)

Eliot restricts the necessity of shared belief, claiming that readers need not believe what the poet believes. However, he maintains that they must strive to understand the poet's beliefs and their reasons:

> You are not called upon to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat's worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief. (Eliot, 1932, p. 219)

Eliot (1932) thus drives his argument to its conclusion: "If there is 'Literature,' if there is 'Poetry,' then it must be possible to have full literary or poetic appreciation without sharing the beliefs of the poet" (pp. 229-230). If poetry were not independent of belief, then we would cease to have poetry and be left only with philosophy. Only when poetry is judged as poetry can it free itself from philosophy and belief.

Nonetheless, Eliot acknowledged a weakness in this theory-a weakness he was the first to recognize. In the same essay on Dante, he conceded that shared belief does, in fact, make appreciation easier: "So I can only conclude that I cannot, in practice, wholly separate my poetic appreciation from my personal beliefs" (Eliot, 1932, p. 231).

In *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*, Eliot (1933) also writes: "One's taste in poetry cannot be isolated from one's other interests and passions; it affects them and is affected by them, and must be limited as oneself is limited" (pp. 27-28). This acknowledgment merely marks a stage of aesthetic appreciation-a point at which the reader especially evaluates the poet's beliefs when those beliefs are not personally shared.

When Eliot turned to Shelley, he had to admit the brilliance of human ideals found in his work. He could not separate Shelley's poetry from his beliefs (Eliot, 1933). Thus, Eliot was compelled to qualify his earlier argument and ultimately concluded by emphasizing the maturity of belief:

> When the doctrine, theory, belief, or 'view of life' presented in a poem is one which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience, it interposes no obstacle to the reader's enjoyment, whether it is one that he accept or deny, approve or deprecate. When it is one that the reader rejects as childish or feeble, it may, for a reader of well-developed mind, set up an almost complete check. (Eliot, 1933, p. 87)

In a 1955 lecture on Goethe, Eliot (1965) further refined this idea by stating that the crucial aspect of poetry is not the belief itself, but the poet's wisdom: "Whether the philosophy or the religious faith of Dante or Shakespeare or Goethe is acceptable to us or not… there is the wisdom that we can all accept" (p. 263). However, this principle can only apply to the greatest poets. With inferior poets whose genius lacks depth and whose beliefs are unsatisfying, readers may only find solace in the pleasure of overcoming another's philosophical convictions. Yet that pleasure can never match the joy of reading works whose beliefs one can actually share (Eliot, 1932).

IV. EXPLORING ELIOT'S EVOLVING BELIEFS: FROM DISILLUSIONMENT TO FAITH IN MODERN POETRY

The issue of poetic belief is one of the most significant controversies in modern criticism. In a sense, the entire future of poetry may depend on how this problem is understood. In an era characterized by the absence of a central framework for belief, each individual is left to believe differently from others, and this has greatly intensified the problem of poetic belief. Eliot was acutely aware of this issue, particularly as his own beliefs were unpopular among intellectual circles and even threatened the reception of his poetry (Eliot, 1932, p. 230).

Eliot's application of his theory of impersonality to his own poetry reveals his struggle to create an acceptable poetic form for the twentieth century. The first part of his impersonality theory deals with the objectification of emotion, primarily through his concept of the "objective correlative." In developing this concept, Eliot aimed to provide a formula for handling poetic emotion. It remains one of his most influential theories, as much poetic practice can be explained through its terms.

The second part of Eliot's impersonality theory addresses how the poet's beliefs enter the poem. This is the central concern of this study: the problem of poetic belief. This theory examines how much of Eliot's personal belief is embedded in his poetry, and how the question of belief is treated particularly in his later works.

Eliot's fame as a leading voice of the "Lost Generation" was solidified by the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 and *The Hollow Men* in 1925. These poems, along with his earlier works, conveyed a profound sense of disillusionment. Among those who shared such disillusionment, Eliot was perceived as one of the most authentic and intense voices. Young intellectuals and radicals regarded Eliot as a leader in their rebellion against nineteenth-century standards, viewing him as a representative figure of dissatisfaction (Eliot, 1932).

In 1928, however, Eliot publicly announced his conversion to Christianity, followed by the publication of the religious poem *Ash Wednesday* in 1930. This provoked immediate backlash, and many of his earlier followers accused him of betrayal. Consequently, Eliot came to be seen as a poet with two distinct careers: one of disillusionment and another of faith. Had those critics paid closer attention to Eliot's critical theory, they might have understood his poetic development as a continuous process in which his early work already anticipated his later trajectory (Eliot, 1932).

To understand how Eliot's early poetry has been interpreted, it is necessary to ask whether the disillusionment it expresses is personal. Is the indecisive Boston gentleman Prufrock a stand-in for Eliot himself? When Prufrock famously states, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," is this a direct reflection of Eliot's own ennui? Are the despondent lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" his own voice? Does the old man in *Gerontion*, who speaks of a "dull head among windy spaces,"

speak for Eliot?

Is the protagonist of *The Waste Land*, fishing by the shore while the world crumbles, Eliot himself? Is *The Hollow Men*, which describes its speaker as a "shape without form, shade without color, paralyzed force, gesture without motion," a direct expression of Eliot's own beliefs? If so, then those who accused Eliot of changing coats might have been justified. If these voices reflect Eliot's own feelings, then he expressed not only his personal despair but the disillusionment of an era.

However, Eliot explicitly rejects such generational interpretations in *Thoughts After Lambeth*:

> I dislike the word 'generation' which has been a talisman for the last ten years; when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land*, some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention. (Eliot, 1932, p. 324)

If Eliot did not intend to express generational disillusionment, then his impersonality theory provides the most convincing explanation. His assertion that a great poet, in writing about himself, writes about his age, is a key to interpreting his early works. In these poems, Eliot uses the prevailing philosophies of his generation to reveal his dissatisfaction with them. While he expresses disillusionment, it is not with life itself but with the modern mode of living. His poetry employs the beliefs of his contemporaries not because he shares them, but to critique them.

This has led to frequent misinterpretations. As Eliot wrote: "It happens now and then that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation" (Eliot, 1932, p. 291). Eliot's mood was far removed from that of his generation. Even in his early poetry, he articulates an emerging religious consciousness and a profound distaste for the secular modern life, which stood in contrast to the spirit of the age.

If Eliot's poetry was not meant to express disillusionment with life, but rather with the conditions of modern existence, then *Prufrock* must be understood as a character through whom Eliot expresses such a reaction. Eliot's method was to construct characters who speak for themselves, thereby objectifying his sentiments without personal intrusion. "Here is modern man," he seems to say through Prufrock, "look and see how empty is a life without faith."

Intelligent readers could perceive the emptiness of such a life. The elderly figure in *Gerontion*, the protagonist in *The Waste Land*, and the speaker in *The Hollow Men* serve a similar function. Eliot does not identify with these figures. He does not directly use his own emotions or beliefs. Rather, he uses the beliefs of modern man, which led many to mistake

them as his own.

Eliot does not share the hopelessness his characters express. He objectifies his emotions and beliefs through these figures and indirectly suggests a religious alternative to the empty life they portray. The emergence of spiritual faith begins with a rejection of the material world. In Eliot's early poetry, this growing faith is emphasized indirectly.

These early works are not personal expressions of generational disillusionment. From the perspective of Eliot's theory of impersonality, it becomes clear that he does not directly reveal his personality or beliefs. Instead, he uses the beliefs of his generation for poetic and moral purposes.

He does not claim that a poet's beliefs are entirely absent from his work. Eliot uses the philosophies of his generation not because he believes in them, but because he cannot believe in them. In this way, he reveals his beliefs through the falsehood of modern philosophies. Eliot's poetic faith lies in his rejection of the modern way of life. He does not satirize or affirm it. He uses the beliefs of others to show that he cannot believe them himself.

This is the central argument: Eliot does not detach his personal beliefs from his poetry. His conviction that modern skepticism is an inadequate philosophy, and that religion offers the only viable solution to the spiritual crisis of modern man, is at the core of his early poetry.

Ultimately, Eliot demonstrates through his own poetry that a poet often uses the philosophies of his generation, regardless of personal belief. The great poet writes about himself while writing about his age. Eliot's use of contemporary philosophy in his early poetry has led to many misunderstandings about his intentions. His personal beliefs, however, are always present-sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly.

Eliot later acknowledged that the idea that a poet need not believe in the ideals expressed in his work is flawed. In his essay on Goethe, he states:

> Now in so far as anything I have written on the subject in the past says or suggests that the poet need not believe a philosophical idea which he has chosen to embody in his verse, Professor Heller is, no doubt, quite right in contradicting me. For such a suggestion would appear to be a justification of insincerity, and would annihilate all poetic values except those of technical accomplishment. (Eliot, 1965, p. 259)

Perhaps Eliot used Christian belief in *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* because he came to believe that a poet can only use ideals he sincerely accepts. Whatever the reason, Eliot was wise to revise his position. Had the beliefs expressed indirectly in his early work not become explicit in his later poetry, his technical accomplishments alone would not have secured his place as a major poet. Eliot's eventual embrace of Anglican Christianity demonstrates that impersonality and belief are not mutually exclusive. Rather, his later poetry exemplifies how deeply held convictions can be filtered through aesthetic form to

achieve impersonality, suggesting a dialectical relationship between belief and poetic expression.

Eliot's growing awareness that poets must incorporate their poetic appreciation into their work is evident throughout his poetry. As he matured as a poet and converted to Christianity, his beliefs became more explicit. In some ways, his later poetry became more personal. Though he continued to objectify emotion, he replaced the borrowed beliefs of characters like Prufrock and Sweeney with expressions of his own Christian faith.

Eliot's early beliefs were negative; he deeply loathed the modern attitude toward life. His later beliefs, however, were positive. He found a belief system that allowed him to move beyond the denunciations of modernity found in his early poetry. From 1930 onward, his poetry was devoted to expressing the struggle to discover a belief necessary for living. Rather than merely exposing the emptiness of modern beliefs, Eliot turned to religious faith as the only hope for modern man.

Therefore, Eliot's poetic career can be divided into two periods: one of rejection and one of affirmation. Though these two periods are part of a single process, each is rooted in belief. Despite the increasing personal nature of his later work, Eliot never abandoned his belief that the great poet writes about himself while writing about his age. He always wrote about his generation.

Even *Four Quartets* contains passages expressing the confusion of modern life, echoing *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*: "Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind / That blows before and after time / Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs" (Eliot, 2001a, p. 120).

Even when writing about Christian faith, Eliot does not detach himself from his generation. The spiritual emptiness of the age is what led him to seek solace in religion. In this sense, his poetry about belief aims to redeem his generation. Eliot dramatized the nihilism of the twentieth century as Shakespeare did the moral confusion of the Renaissance and Dante the unity of the Middle Ages. When he said that the great poet writes about himself while writing about his age, he was articulating the core of his own poetic philosophy. It is doubtful that any other poet has written so extensively-and so incisively-about the twentieth century.

V. TEACHING THE IMPERSONAL THEORY IN KOREAN ENGLISH CLASSES

This section proposes a pedagogical approach for effectively teaching T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory in Korean EFL classrooms. The goal is to help English major students not only grasp Eliot's literary philosophy but also develop critical thinking and English proficiency through literary analysis. A structured methodology will be introduced to help

students understand the theory and apply it in their own writing and analysis.

The first step in teaching Eliot's Impersonal Theory is to ensure that students have a strong foundational understanding of the core tenets of his theory. This includes explaining that the poet must detach from personal emotions, that poetry should convey universal truths and emotions, and that the poet acts as a craftsman who shapes the poem through precise language and technique (Eliot, 1920). To make these concepts accessible, teachers should use clear definitions for terms like "impersonal," "objectivity," and "universality." Translating some of these terms into Korean can further assist students in understanding the nuances of the theory. These instructional strategies are grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through engagement, reflection, and interaction (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, this study adopts elements of task-based learning (TBL), which encourages learners to use the target language to complete meaningful tasks, thereby fostering deeper comprehension and authentic communication (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). In the Korean university context, where students often experience high affective filters and are hesitant to participate in open-ended discussions, Eliot's impersonality theory offers a structured and emotionally distanced framework that promotes literary engagement without requiring vulnerable self-disclosure (Eliot, 1920). Furthermore, the theory provides an effective entry point into modernist texts, allowing learners to focus on formal elements such as diction, imagery, and structure, rather than relying on culturally specific emotional content that may alienate or confuse EFL learners.

Once students have a grasp of the theoretical underpinnings, they can begin to explore how this theory manifests in Eliot's poetry. Works like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Waste Land", and "The Hollow Men" are ideal texts for this purpose (Eliot, 2001a, 2001b). These poems exemplify Eliot's impersonal approach and provide rich material for analysis. Detailed examples of classroom activities and instructional materials are provided in the Appendix.

The first phase of the classroom experience should involve close reading, where the class reads the poems aloud to appreciate their rhythm and tone. After reading, the teacher can guide students in discussions that focus on the poem's themes and structural elements. This helps students move away from subjective interpretations and toward a more objective and analytical approach. Teachers should also use guided questions to help students focus on the technical aspects of the poems, such as how symbolism, imagery, and structure contribute to the theme of impersonality (Eliot, 1920, 1932). For instance, questions like "How does Eliot use symbolism and imagery to convey meaning?" or "How does the poem's structure contribute to the theme of detachment?" can guide students toward an impersonal understanding of the text.

In addition to close reading and guided analysis, small group work can help deepen

students' understanding. After discussing a poem in class, students can be divided into groups and assigned specific sections of the poem. Each group would analyze their passage through the lens of the Impersonal Theory and present their findings. This collaborative approach encourages peer learning and provides opportunities for students to engage in a range of interpretations. Comparative analysis is also an important strategy. Students can be asked to compare Eliot's poetry with the works of poets who emphasize personal expression, such as William Wordsworth at 1802 or Sylvia Plath at 1965. This exercise allows students to better understand the differences between personal and impersonal approaches in poetry and enhances their understanding of Eliot's theory.

To further solidify their understanding, students should be encouraged to apply Eliot's Impersonal Theory to their own writing. Teachers can assign exercises that require students to write impersonal poems, focusing on universal themes and avoiding personal emotions. This task allows students to practice detaching themselves from their personal experiences and emotions, thus honing their skills in objective writing (Eliot, 1920).

Additionally, assigning analytical essays in which students examine a poem (either by Eliot or another poet) through the lens of the Impersonal Theory will encourage students to apply their theoretical understanding to literary texts. Essays should require students to analyze how the poet achieves objectivity and how personal emotion is subordinated to the art of poetry.

To further support their writing development, peer review sessions can be implemented, where students critique one another's work, focusing on whether the poem maintains an impersonal tone and whether the analysis avoids personal bias. These review sessions not only help students improve their writing skills but also foster critical thinking as they evaluate their peers' work.

Incorporating interactive classroom activities will further engage students with the Impersonal Theory and encourage creative expression. Role-playing exercises allow students to step into the personas of T. S. Eliot and other poets to discuss literary theories and poetry. This interactive method helps students understand the theory from different perspectives and encourages deeper reflection on its application. Group discussions or debates on personal versus impersonal poetry can also help students refine their understanding of detachment in poetry, while sharpening their argumentation and critical thinking skills.

Additionally, creative visualization exercises, where students represent key symbols or motifs in Eliot's poems, can offer a tactile and visual means of engaging with the material. For example, in The Waste Land, students could visualize the "fire sermon" or the "drowned Phoenician sailor," helping them to understand the significance of these images within the impersonal framework of the poem.

Integrating Eliot's Impersonal Theory into Korean EFL classrooms requires a balance of

theoretical instruction, practical application, and creative engagement. By introducing students to Eliot's perspective on poetry and emphasizing the importance of objectivity, this methodology helps students improve their analytical skills while enhancing their English proficiency. Close reading, guided analysis, writing assignments, and interactive activities will allow students to appreciate the technical beauty of Eliot's poetry and internalize the Impersonal Theory as a tool for literary and linguistic growth. Ultimately, this approach encourages a deeper understanding of literature and fosters critical thinking, helping students approach poetry not as a personal expression but as a refined art form.

For clarity and instructional coherence, Table 1 presents a structured summary of the pedagogical stages, teaching strategies, and learning objectives derived from the proposed approach.

TABLE 1
Pedagogical Procedures for Teaching Eliot's Impersonal Theory

Stage	Teaching Objective	Teaching-Learning Activities	Theoretical Basis
Stage 1 (Foundational Understanding)	Understanding the Core Concepts of Eliot's Impersonal Theory	• Defining key concepts such as impersonal/objectivity/universality • Providing Korean glosses for selected terms • Presenting sample poetic lines to illustrate each concept	Constructivist Learning Theory: Learners construct concepts independently and expand their understanding
Stage 2 (Close Reading)	Identifying How the Theory Is Realized in Major Works	• Reading aloud poems such as Prufrock and The Waste Land to explore rhythm and tone • Analyzing structure, imagery, and symbolism • Providing guiding questions that promote objective interpretation	Minimizing reader-response and promoting objective reading through a formalist approach
Stage 3 (Guided Analysis)	Analyzing Textual Elements that Reflect Impersonal Poetics	• Using guiding questions such as "How do symbolism and imagery create impersonality?" • Exploring structural devices and techniques that suppress personal emotion	Text-based Analysis: Strengthening analysis focused on form and technique
Stage 4 (Collaborative Interpretation)	Deepening Understanding through Collaborative Interpretation	• Dividing the poem into sections for small-group analysis • Having each group present their findings and provide peer feedback	Social Constructivism: Developing higher-order thinking through interaction
Stage 5 (Comparative Reading)	Comparing Personal and Impersonal Poetry	• Comparing Eliot's poems with those of Wordsworth and Plath • Conducting contrastive analysis with poems centered on personal emotion	Critical Thinking Enhancement: Strengthening conceptual differentiation and critical reading
Stage 6 (Impersonal Writing Practice)	Internalizing the Concept through Creative Application	• Writing poems that exclude personal emotion • Practicing the use of universal	Task-Based Learning (TBL): Promoting authentic learning and

		themes and objective diction	conceptual application through language use
Stage 7 (Analytical Writing)	Enhancing Theory-Based Literary Analysis Skills	• Writing impersonal-theory-based analytical essays on Eliot or other poets • Requiring analysis focused on objectivity, structure, and symbolism	Academic Writing Skills: Strengthening theory-based critical writing
Stage 8 (Peer Review)	nhancing Critical Thinking and Metacognitive Awareness	• Checking peers' writing for emotional intrusion and maintenance of objectivity • Reviewing logical structure and textual evidence	Metacognitive Development: Fostering self-reflection through peer evaluation
Stage 9 (Creative & Interactive Activities)	Promoting Multi-Dimensional Understanding of the Theory	• Role-playing Eliot and debating personal vs. impersonal poetry • Visualizing key symbols and motifs	Multi-modal Learning: Expanding conceptual understanding through diverse modes of expression
Stage 10 (Integration & Reflection)	Reestablishing the Literary and Linguistic Value of the Impersonal Theory	• Producing learning portfolios • Writing reflective essays on the process of applying the theory • Receiving instructor feedback	Reflective Practice: Deepening understanding through the restructuring of the learning process

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper has explored T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory and its application in teaching English literature within Korean EFL classrooms. The primary objective was to examine how Eliot's theory, which advocates for the detachment of the poet from personal emotions and experiences in the creation of poetry, can be effectively taught to English major students in Korea. Throughout this study, we have analyzed the key principles of Eliot's theory, examined its relevance to contemporary literary studies, and proposed a teaching methodology that blends theory with practical classroom activities.

The paper began by introducing the fundamental tenets of Eliot's Impersonal Theory, including the emphasis on the poet's objectivity, the detachment of personal emotions, and the focus on universal themes. By analyzing Eliot's own poetry, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," the paper demonstrated how these works embody the impersonal approach, allowing students to understand the application of the theory in real literary examples. The methodology section provided concrete strategies for teaching the theory, including close reading, comparative analysis, creative writing exercises, and group discussions. These approaches not only fostered a deeper understanding of Eliot's theory but also helped students develop their critical thinking and analytical writing skills.

The paper concluded by emphasizing the importance of an integrated teaching approach

that balances theoretical knowledge with creative exploration. By engaging students in various classroom activities, such as role-playing, debates, and peer reviews, teachers can facilitate a more immersive learning experience, helping students grasp the nuances of Eliot's theory while improving their English proficiency. This pedagogical model encourages a more objective and analytical approach to literature, which is valuable not only for understanding Eliot's work but also for developing broader skills in literary analysis and writing.

T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory is not merely an aesthetic proposal for poetic creation; it also offers practical pedagogical value in the context of teaching literature to Korean university students learning EFL. This section outlines the pedagogical implications of Eliot's theory in three areas: (1) enhancement of critical literary thinking, (2) development of poetic comprehension and creative production, and (3) cultivation of intercultural literacy and reflective distancing (Kramsch, 1993).

Eliot's theory encourages students to view poetry not as a vehicle for personal emotion but as an objective artistic construction shaped by tradition and technique. This perspective enables learners to move beyond subjective interpretation and engage in higher-order thinking such as analysis, comparison, and critique. In the Korean higher education context, where fostering critical reading and analytical skills is a core objective, Eliot's approach provides a robust theoretical framework for literary education. By distancing themselves from personal responses, students learn to uncover universal themes and examine the aesthetic strategies embedded in poetic texts.

The application of Eliot's impersonal approach particularly benefits Korean EFL students who often struggle with the cultural and emotional distance inherent in English literary texts. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by unfamiliar cultural references or emotional contexts, students can approach poems as structured artistic objects worthy of systematic analysis. This methodological shift transforms potential barriers into opportunities for deeper engagement. For instance, when analyzing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," students can focus on Eliot's use of dramatic monologue and fragmented consciousness as technical devices rather than becoming discouraged by the poem's cultural specificity or emotional complexity.

Furthermore, Eliot's emphasis on tradition and literary continuity provides Korean students with a framework for understanding intertextuality and literary influence. By examining how Eliot incorporates and transforms earlier literary traditions, students develop skills in comparative analysis and begin to appreciate literature as an ongoing dialogue across cultures and historical periods. This approach aligns with Korean educational values that emphasize respect for tradition while encouraging innovative thinking.

The idea that a poet is a catalyst who transforms emotions into universal poetic forms provides a meaningful basis for writing-focused classroom activities. Assignments that

require students to compose impersonal poems or to rewrite existing poems through an impersonal lens help develop both their creative expression and formal control. Such tasks integrate form-focused instruction with imaginative writing, thereby strengthening students' linguistic precision and literary creativity. Moreover, through writing exercises aligned with Eliot's theory, students can internalize key principles of poetic objectivity.

Practical classroom applications might include exercises where students transform personal experiences into objective poetic forms, using techniques such as persona, symbolic imagery, and dramatic situation. For example, students could write about experiences of urban alienation-a theme particularly relevant to contemporary Korean society-using Eliot's modernist techniques of fragmentation and juxtaposition. This approach allows students to explore universal themes while developing their technical skills in English poetic composition.

Additionally, Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative" provides a concrete tool for teaching students how to convey emotion through concrete imagery and situation rather than direct statement. Korean students, who often come from educational backgrounds emphasizing explicit expression, can benefit from learning this more subtle approach to emotional communication in English literature. Through guided practice in creating objective correlatives, students develop both their understanding of modernist poetic techniques and their ability to express complex ideas in English with nuance and sophistication.

Eliot's concept of impersonality foregrounds the poem as a cultural artifact rather than a personal confession. This shift in perspective allows Korean students to engage with English literature not simply as an emotional experience, but as a structured reflection of cultural, historical, and philosophical values. By analyzing how Eliot uses characters and voices to critique modern life, learners develop intercultural literacy—the ability to interpret texts from perspectives outside their own cultural framework. Furthermore, Eliot's theory fosters the skill of self-distancing, allowing students to read with both empathy and critical detachment.

This aspect of Eliot's theory proves particularly valuable for Korean EFL students who must navigate between their native cultural perspectives and the cultural contexts embedded in English literature. The impersonal approach helps students avoid the pitfall of either complete cultural assimilation or defensive cultural rejection. Instead, they learn to maintain a productive tension between engagement and analysis, developing what might be called "critical empathy"-the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences while maintaining analytical objectivity.

Moreover, Eliot's emphasis on the poet as a medium rather than a source encourages Korean students to consider how their own cultural backgrounds can serve as lenses for interpreting English literature without imposing inappropriate cultural assumptions. This

balanced approach to cross-cultural reading helps students develop genuine intercultural competence rather than superficial cultural knowledge.

In sum, Eliot's Impersonal Theory can significantly enrich EFL literary education by enhancing students' abilities in critical thinking, creative writing, and intercultural understanding. These outcomes align closely with the goals of Korean university English programs, which emphasize analytical reasoning, linguistic competence, and cross-cultural communication. The theory's emphasis on objectivity and formal analysis provides Korean students with concrete tools for engaging with English literature, while its attention to tradition and cultural dialogue helps develop sophisticated intercultural awareness.

Future research should explore the practical impact of applying Eliot's theory in classroom settings and consider developing a comprehensive pedagogical model grounded in modernist literary theory. Longitudinal studies examining how exposure to Eliot's impersonal approach affects students' overall literary competence and cross-cultural understanding would provide valuable insights for EFL curriculum development. Additionally, investigating how Eliot's theory might be adapted for different proficiency levels and integrated with other pedagogical approaches would further enhance its practical application in Korean university settings.

This study is limited in that it remains primarily theoretical, without empirical classroom application. Future studies should implement the proposed pedagogical strategies in actual Korean EFL settings and assess their impact on learners' literary competence and intercultural understanding. Moreover, further investigation into how impersonality theory can be differentiated for varying proficiency levels would enhance its practical utility across diverse educational contexts.

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APPENDIX

Comparative Analysis Activity

1.Activity Overview

- Purpose: To deepen critical thinking by contrasting poetic modes and identifying features of impersonality.
- Learning Outcomes:
  - Students recognize stylistic contrasts between Romantic/Confessional and Modernist poetics.
  - Students develop analytical and interpretive skills.
  - Students apply Eliot's Impersonal Theory to real texts.

2. Teacher Instructions

Step 1. Text Selection

• Choose one impersonal poem (e.g., The Hollow Men).
• Choose one personal/confessional poem (e.g., Plath's "Daddy" or Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud").

Step 2. Guided Comparison

Students complete a chart comparing:

Feature	Impersonal Poem (Eliot)	Personal Poem (Plath/Wordsworth)
Emotional expression		
Use of imagery		
Speaker/voice		
Structure/organization		
Cultural specificity		

Purpose of the poem		
Degree of universality		

Step 3. Group Discussion
Discussion questions:
1. Which poem requires more reader interpretation? Why?
2. How does impersonality influence the poem's meaning-making process?
3. Which poetic mode (personal/impersonal) seems more accessible for EFL learners, and why?

Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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