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Critical Literacy in the EFL Classroom: Perspectives of Undergraduates on Reading beyond the Text

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This paper reports on a qualitative case study that explored the possibility of developing critical literacy within a general English reading program at the collegiate level in Korea. Conducted in the context of a mandatory English class with a novice instructor and 39 freshmen, the study aimed to bring to light the way critical literacy was closely related to the students' ability to read beyond the text. Data were collected from classroom observations, a student reflection paper, and instructor interviews, and were analyzed qualitatively. The findings illustrated that the critical approach to literacy offered students an opportunity to situate their reading practices within the larger sociopolitical world and to develop critical consciousness through collaboration. Dissatisfied with the traditional cognitively oriented and teacher-centered approach to reading, the students spoke highly of the critical literacy approach as it allowed them to reflect critically on the issues presented in the text, which were relevant to their lives, to form and express their own opinions, and to search for ways to bring about changes. Although students had positive experiences in the critical literacy class overall, they encountered some challenges as well. Implications for successful implementation of critical literacy are suggested.

[critical literacy/college students/general English/reading pedagogy]

I. INTRODUCTION

College English has been an integral component of the general education curriculum of higher education in Korea. The increasing significance of the provision for effective English education is closely related to the larger sociocultural and economic milieu of the contemporary globalized world where good English proficiency is considered an

important cultural and economic capital for the so-called global citizens. While general English programs at the collegiate level in Korea has historically been grammar- and reading-oriented until around the 1990s when students' communicative competence became the central instructional goal, the current trend seems to emphasize on the integrated development of the four language skills (Ha, 2010; Kim & Lim, 2013). Despite the emerging interests in spoken English recently, English reading remains a central focus in general English programs as its importance was ascertained by numerous studies on reading instruction in Korea (Choi & Choi, 2015; Joh & Lim, 2009; Jung, 2008; Y. Kim, 2012; O, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Suh, 2006; E.-M. Yang, 2010).

Research on general English reading in Korea, however, has largely centered on cognitive and psycholinguistic domains where most of the studies focus on teaching reading skills using specific reading strategy trainings or recently developed multimedia-assisted instructional tools (Byun, 2014; Jung, 2008; J.-S. Kim, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2011; Nam & Kim, 2008; Oh, 2010; Suh, 2006). While effective pedagogy and strategy training are of great importance, the silence of understanding reading practices within its larger sociocultural context is problematic given the inherent nature of literacy as a sociopolitical phenomenon. With the power and status accorded to English and its indelible consequences around the world, teaching English from the perspective of critical literacy is not only desirable but also imperative as language and literacy practices are profoundly connected to learners' understanding of themselves and their culture. The critical literacy approach further deserves our immediate attention as it does not only assist the development of learners' reading and writing skills but also help them critically engage in English literacy practices as active agents of constructing new meanings and identities for the future. Responding to the absence of critical approaches to literacy in the field of ELT in Korea, the present study examined the experiences of college students and a novice instructor in a general English reading class that incorporated the Freirean critical literacy approach. The study in particular aimed to explore the use of critical literacy as a tool to help students understand their reading practices within the large sociocultural and political contexts, while assisting them to develop critical consciousness and to vision for transformative change in their immediate lives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Critical Literacy

Critical literacy views learning to read and write as social practices influenced by

complicated interactions of sociocultural, historical, political, and economic contexts (Freire, 2003; Luke, 2012; Pennycook, 2001). Scholars working within the broad field of critical approaches to literacy problematize the mainstream approaches to literacy that focus solely on an isolated activity of acquiring functional skills to read and write, while arguing that language and literacy education cannot be properly understood without linking it to the larger sociopolitical world (Fairclough, 2010; Freire, 2003; Giroux, 2001; Luke, 2004, 2012; McLaren, 2003; Shor, 1992). Taking literacy education as always bound up within sociocultural and political situations where different ideologies are in constant struggle, critical theorists aim to assist language learners whose voices have been silenced to question the dominant and taken-for-granted ideologies, and to search for ways of reconstructing their identities, histories, and cultures. Through the engagement with critical literacy, critical educators believe that the previously marginalized learners not only can fight against injustice and inequalities but also can envision and strive for change.

While there exist different versions of critical approaches to literacy, Freire (2003) is considered a pioneer whose work on libertarian education has strongly influenced critical education, particularly in North America (Luke, 2012; Pennycook, 2001). Based on his literacy work with peasants in Brazil and in other countries in South America, Freire argued for the need to diverge from "banking concepts of education," which is designed to control thinking and action of students by prescribing their roles as "receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p. 72) of partial reality from the teacher, and therefore fails to educate them to develop the critical consciousness. Instead, Freire argued for libertarian education which allows the oppressed to "strive for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (p. 81, italics original). In libertarian education, teachers are expected to learn with students through dialogue, and, through the dialogic process, students become "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 81) and are expected to commit to act against oppressive situations as they become increasingly posed with problems in the world and with the world.

Conceptualizing knowledge as socioculturally constructed in the classroom between a teacher and students through reflection and "mutual inquiry" (p. 14), Shor and Freire (1987) proposed "situated pedagogy" (p. 18) in which the teacher and students work together to identify themes that are most problematic to students' lives. Students can then reflect on the themes objectively and from a critical stance. They highlighted the importance of starting with concrete experiences of student's everyday life to "reach a rigorous understanding of reality" (p. 20). Shor and Freire believed that through this opportunity to understand reality critically by problem-posing comes student's empowerment, which is the prerequisite for radical transformation of society.

While typical classes in liberatory education starts from the themes generated from

students' immediate experience in their local contexts and conditions, Shor (1992) explained that critical teachers can also use topical themes in their efforts of making his/her classroom emancipatory. A topical theme, according to Shor, is "a social question of key importance locally, nationally, or globally that is not generated directly from the students' conversation … [but] … raised in class by the teacher" (p. 55). As long as the topical theme is "presented in a meaningful context related to the students' situation and to the ongoing curriculum" (p. 57), Shor argued that it will enhance students' experience in democratic learning by engaging them in diverse sociocultural issues, which are important to their lives but have never been studied critically.

2. Empirical Studies on Critical Literacy

In the field of second language literacy, quite a few studies have taken to the fore the issues of language, power, inequality, and resistance, while examining the multifarious ways that adult second language learners' engagement in critical literacy practices was profoundly related to their renewed understanding of themselves and their surroundings, which led them to initiate action for change (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Frye, 1999; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Graman, 1988; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Janks, 2000; Keddie, 2008; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Rivera, 1999). In an English as a foreign language (EFL) context of Korea, however, not only have studies that examined issues related to reading and writing from a critical literacy framework been scarce, but critical literacy studies targeted at adult learners have been very few (Y. M. Kim, 2004; Kim & Na, 2015; Suh & Huh, 2014; J.-W. Yang, 2009).

Guided by Fairclough's (1995) critical discourses analysis, Y. M. Kim (2004) examined college students' experiences of critical reading in a general English class and found that critical reading practice fostered students to begin reading against the text. According to Y. M. Kim, the college students in the study approached reading critically through critical reading practices, while discovering the hidden ideologies underlying the text and analyzing the way grammatical structures and vocabularies were used to represent certain worldviews of the author. Through this process, students began to restructure the original text to better reflect their own ideas and positions. With her positive experience in a critically oriented reading class with beginner-level college students, Y. M. Kim argued for the possibility of implementing the critical reading practice with low English proficiency students. Similarly, in the context of a general English reading class, J.-W. Yang (2009) reported that the college students enrolled in her critical literacy class learned to read texts critically, while challenging the way authors represented reality in a given text and examining alternative ways to recreate the text. Their engagement in critical literacy not only allowed them to realize their own

biases and prejudicial attitudes but also enabled them to view themselves as active readers and co-constructors of texts.

Working with English majors enrolled in an elective general English class, Suh and Huh (2014) also found that their critical literacy instruction assisted students to approach texts from multiple perspectives, analyzing the author's biases and pursuing ways to present alternative views. Similar to Y. M. Kim's (2004) study, the students in Suh and Huh's study were able to tap into textual features such as grammar structures and words to uncover a writer's ideological stances, through which the students felt that they have become more active readers, resisting what was offered from the author but creating their own positions. The students also thought that critical literacy instruction led them to not only develop critical awareness but also build up reading strategies. Despite the overall positive experience of students with critical literacy, Suh and Huh reported that some students found it uncomfortable and burdensome to challenge the author's position and the text content, which they had regarded as having authority. In addition, students considered it difficult to read texts critically when they could not comprehend the content clearly. For successful implementation of such critically oriented reading class, Suh and Huh emphasized on the importance of instructor's expertise, passion, and guidance.

Incorporating a literature-based critical literacy, Kim and Na (2015) demonstrated the possibility of using short stories to promote critical literacy among college students. Through their critical literacy class that was influenced by the framework of McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), Kim and Na found that short stories were beneficial not only in improving student's reading speed and extensive reading skills, but also in promoting critical consciousness. The students in their study began to critically analyze issues that have previously been taken for granted and to form multiple perspectives on these issues. As the semester progressed, students became more confident in reading beyond the textual level, while searching for voices missed and reconstructing the text with their own critical and independent interpretations beyond what the author had presented in the text. Through this process, Kim and Na argued that the students began to build their own agency as critical readers.

Given the scarcity of studies that center around critical approaches to literacy in Korea as shown above, the present study aims to add to the current literature by exploring the possibility of the Freirean critical literacy approach as a reading instruction for general English reading programs that brings students' attention to the complex relations of literacy practices and the larger sociocultural and political contexts, thereby helping them to *read the world* while *reading the word*.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Context and Participants

The present study was conducted in a general English reading class in a private university in Korea during the spring semester of 2014. The university offered a variety of general English classes, two of which were mandatory—one focused on reading while the other on speaking. All freshmen were required to take a general English reading class for two semesters, which met twice per week for about 50 minutes per session. The general English reading for freshmen had a fixed curriculum and used a standardized testing system. At the time of data collection, the university was using *Northstar 5: Reading and writing* (Miller & Cohen, 2009) for freshmen English reading.

As a qualitative case study, I examined a case of one particular general English reading class, which comprised 39 students from different departments in the college of science. These students were the major participants of the present study. A novice instructor was responsible for the class. The instructor had had several years of English teaching experience outside the university prior to the spring semester of 2014, but had been teaching the general English reading class for approximately a year at the time of data collection. As a doctoral candidate in the department of English, the instructor had taken a few graduate courses on critical approaches to TESOL and thought highly of the critical literacy approach, regarding it as a potential pedagogy that could replace the traditional method of reading.

Although the fixed curriculum of reading for freshmen did not allow much flexibility to incorporate innovation in instruction, the instructor agreed with the proposal to implement the critical literacy approach in the instruction of two reading chapters: one before the midterm and the other after the midterm. I selected the two chapters that I thought dealt with topics that were feasible for using the critical literacy approach and to which students could easily relate. The first chapter covered environmental issues, while the second chapter was about language and identity.[1] In devising the syllabus and class activities based on critical literacy for the two chapters, I designed an original plan and consulted with the instructor to verify the plan's feasibility, by inviting her feedback and ideas. While she agreed with the plan in general, some revisions were made to the original plan due to the time constraint. In addition, as the freshmen English reading course administered a standardized test, top priority must be given to ensure that the

[1] For this paper, I will refer the two chapters as chapter one and chapter two for convenience. However, they do not correspond to the actual chapters in the book.

students comprehended reading passages and built their knowledge of certain grammatical structures and vocabulary items. Other than these, she was receptive to new ideas. She actively participated in devising the lesson plans for chapter one, by preparing her own schema activation activity with a video clip and a power point presentation that intended to arouse students' interests on the topic of environmental issues. For chapter two, however, she took the original plans and implemented them without giving much feedback.

The critical literacy approach began with problem-posing activities initiated by the instructor, while relating the issue presented in the texts to the students' everyday contexts through activities, such as watching a video clip and/or a power point presentation, and engaging with a guest speaker. The dialogic process between the instructor and students that later ensued often occurred in the form of a whole class discussion and collaborative reflection on the theme of each chapter. For deeper engagement with the themes and the issues, the students worked on a small group project, while doing research in and out of the classroom, and sharing their project with the whole class through presentations. The students were then encouraged to reflect upon the themes and their experiences by writing a reflection paper.

Although the critical literacy approach was used for two chapters, I am reporting on the experiences of the instructor and the students working on chapter two only for this research report due to space limitation. As briefly mentioned above, chapter two dealt with the issue of language, culture, and identity. The main reading passage presented stories of two women (i.e., a Polish immigrant in Canada and a US-born Chinese-American) who shared their childhood experiences of having struggled to adapt to a new culture and language, while creating a new identity in the process. In incorporating the critical literacy approach for chapter two, the topic presented in the text, namely, language, culture, and identity was extended by centering on the students' experience of learning English in Korea and in the contemporary globalized world to ensure appropriacy and relevance to their immediate life. Throughout chapter two, not only did the students focus on comprehending the text and learning new grammar and vocabulary, but they were also encouraged to reflect upon their experiences as EFL learners situated within the lager sociocultural and political world. They were given opportunities to contemplate on the status of English and its sociocultural manifestations in Korea, the meaning of English to them and in the Korean society, and their perceived individual and collective identity in relation to English.

2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected from classroom observations, a student reflection paper, and instructor interviews—both email and face-to-face interviews.[2] For chapter two, I had three classroom observations. While I remained as a pure observer most of the time, sitting at the back while silently observing and recording my observation notes, I was also a participant observer for the second classroom visit as I was invited to give a special lecture. In a dialogic format of discussing with students as a whole class, my special lecture was targeted at working together with and helping students to relate their reading on chapter two to a larger sociocultural context of Korea and to their own lives, while striving collectively to contemplate on the multifarious ways that a seemingly apolitical task of learning to read in English was deeply related to their understanding of themselves and their culture. After each classroom observation, I reflected upon my classroom visit, while thinking over the issues, thoughts, and ideas that arose in the field, which functioned as a progressional stage for the following data collection sessions.

In order to understand better the students' responses to the critical approach to literacy, I collected data from a student reflection paper after completing chapter two. The reflection paper did not have any particular format; rather, it encouraged students to reflect freely on their experiences of studying chapter two and what they believed they learned (or did not learn) when working on the chapter. The reflection paper was typically one-page long and no more than two page in length. The semi-structured interviews with the instructor were conducted in two methods: one via email and the other via in-person. Throughout the spring semester of 2014, I conducted three email interviews and one face-to-face interview. The first email interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester, whereas the other two were conducted right after the instructor had finished each chapter. The face-to-face interview was conducted toward the end of the semester, thus allowing her to reflect upon her experience of incorporating the critical literacy approach. Some of the interview questions were targeted at confirming and asking for her clarification of what I had observed during the classroom observations, whereas the other questions were open-ended, asking about the overall experience as well as the perceived successes and challenges. The email interview was typically one or two pages in length, while the face-to-face interview lasted about less than forty minutes. The face-to-face interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As a qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995), the data analysis process was dynamic and inductive. Although intensive data analysis began after the completion

[2] The data in the present study were all in Korean. I translated them into English for this article.

of data collection, I started analyzing the data while collecting them. While in the field, I started looking closely at what I had gathered and reflected upon my hunches, thoughts, guesses and working hypotheses, which informed the next round of data collection. During this simultaneous data collection and analysis period, I also reviewed the relevant literature, relating my findings to the larger theoretical frameworks. Intensive data analysis began after the data collection was completed. Multiple readings of the entire data set produced initial coding categories through open and analytical codings, which were revised and refined later by re-applying them to the data and testing their usefulness. Through this repetitive process, the final coding categories emerged from the data, which were the basis for writing the narrative of the present study. By breaking the data into small chunks and reassembling them in a new way, I was able to synthesize and contexualize of the experiences of a novice instructor and the students in a critically oriented reading class.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Raising Critical Consciousness through Critical Encounter

1) A New Awakening: The Extensive Penetration of English and Its Culture in Korea

The critical literacy approach incorporated in chapter two seemed to provide students with the opportunity to "reflect upon the issues that they [had] never give[n] much thought on previously" (Student 28). The students confessed that it was through their participation in the class that they began to "realize how widely and deeply the culture of English-speaking countries has permeated into the lives of Koreans" (Student 29). They said that they had been "so accustomed to the culture of English in [their] daily lives" (Student 37) "that [they] actually [had] not considered it as foreign culture" (Student 17). Admitting that they did "not pay attention to the extent to which the western influences in Korea [had been] exerted" (Student 6), they found it "shocking" (Student 3) to "discover the widespread and profound penetration of English and its culture in Korea" (Student 29). After their participation in the critically oriented class, they said that they came to a new realization that the influences have been everywhere, "encompassing trivial things to other diverse domains" (Student 17) such as "newly-coined words, advertisements, food, educational systems, store signs, and gestures" (Student 15). Their experience in the class indeed seemed to bring home to them the deeply-rooted power of English and its culture in the Korean society:

> I am sure that most Koreans are not well aware of the cultural influences of English-speaking countries (such as the United States) despite of its ubiquitous presence in Korea. Chapter two offered me an opportunity to reflect on many issues that I have taken for granted. … I have to say that I was in shock to see how widely the culture of English-speaking countries has spread around us while I was working on our group project and listening to other groups' presentations. (Student 4)

> Through the class, I became more cognizant of the power of English and its culture exerted implicitly into our daily lives. … The project opened my eyes to the western cultural influences ingrained in our society. I came to learn more clearly that the western cultural influences attached to English do exist in Korea even though we do not feel these influences because we are so used to them. (Student 27)

2) The Reality: The Sociocultural Manifestation of English in Korean Society

After realizing that the cultural and linguistic manifestations of English has deeply pervaded into their personal lives and the Korean society, the students began to observe the phenomenon critically. They pointed out that "Koreans seem[ed] to believe unconsciously that the culture of English-speaking countries [was] superior to Koreans" (Student 37), and that "some even [had] a tendency to look up to people just because they [were] well acquainted with and accustomed to the American culture and lifestyles" (Student 10). They added that they observed "a tendency in Korea to treat people with a good command of English highly, or to take it positively to use English words here and there while communicating in Korean, while no one seem[ed] to really care about using Korean correctly" (Student 27). Similarly, students critiqued that "Koreans tend[ed] to think highly of people whose English [was] good, often regarding them as elites, while expressing no interest in whether one [could] use Korean properly based on the rules of Korean orthography" (Student 25). Students further pinpointed that "the Korean society seem[ed] pervaded with the idea that English [was] more refined than Korean" (Student 21) and that "the culture of English-speaking countries [was] more sophisticated than that of Korean" (Student 3). The students confessed that it was through the class that they "[began] to give a serious thought on the possibility that Koreans might have had an inferiority complex of [their] own culture" (Student 23). The class further made them realize that "[they themselves] believe[d] in the idea that speaking good English [made] people look superior and more intelligent" (Student 31) or that "those who [had] a fluent command of English must be smarter and wealthier than others who [did] not" (Student 23).

3) Reflection

Realizing the unconditional longing for and fantasy toward the culture of English-speaking countries prevalent in Korea, students seemed to "feel regrets for [their] own blind belief" (Student 3, 6, & 13) of "devaluing Korean elements as unsophisticated and old-fashioned while regarding highly those who [spoke] good English" (Student 6). By developing better awareness of "the power of cultural influences of English in the lives of Koreans," they said they began to "turn a critical eye toward [themselves] and examine critically [their] unconditional beliefs in the superiority of English and its culture" (Student 3). Students also expressed their concerns in the powerful manifestation of English in the Korean society, one that they did "not even take seriously as it seem[ed] just so natural" (Student 21):

> I think these days we tend to accept western cultures indiscriminately. … It seems that a growing number of young adults think of traditional Korean culture as boring and trivial. I am concerned that we might lose and forget what is truly Korean if we keep focusing on accepting and following English-speaking cultures. (Student 32)

The students added that they "[became] concerned about the potential situations in which Hangeul might be forgotten and disappear as time [went] by" (Student 21) or "whether [they] might lose [their] cultural identity and sentiment, which [was] uniquely Korean" (Student 15). Critically aware of the possibility of "Korean culture being irrevocably replaced by the English culture without anyone even noticing it" (Student 6), the students seemed resolved to "take an appreciative attitude toward Korean culture and to feel proud of it" (Student 10).

4) Developing a Critical Attitude

The critical literacy approach indeed enabled the students to observe objectively the current situation in Korea where "English is used indiscreetly" (Student 37). This critical encounter with the reality allowed students to better appreciate the value of their Korean culture and language while learning the importance of accommodating English and its culture "critically" (Student 35) and "in a discerning manner" (Student 26). In other words, the students seemed to develop a balanced perspective on the indispensability of learning English in the contemporary globalized world, while at the same time understanding the significance of developing a critical attitude toward the powerful influences of English and its culture. Realizing the complexity inherent in the learning of

English, which had previously never occurred to them, the students began to reflect on the ways to properly accommodate English and its cultural influences. They articulated that, "when dealing with the influences of western culture and the accompanying changes manifested in Korea," they needed to avoid attitudes of "accepting everything without reservation" or taking a dichotomic attitude of "all or nothing" (Student 31). Instead, they emphasized on the need to "appropriate the cultural influences by identifying ways to harmonize them with the Korean cultural atmosphere" (Student 31). In addition, the students argued for "preserving and respecting the Korean tradition instead of defying it" (Student 31), while making efforts to protect and cherish Hangeul:

> I think it is important that we have a good grasp of and be familiar with our own culture if we want to better accommodate the culture of English-speaking countries. Instead of accepting everything related to English injudiciously, we should endeavor to accommodate them in a way that works within the sociocultural milieu and sentiments of Korea. We also need to make efforts to know and use Korean well instead of unwittingly taking part in destroying the Korean language by using and relying on English excessively. As Koreans, we should persevere toward preserving our beautiful language, Hangeul, thereby maintaining and handing over the spirit of Korean to the future generations. (Student 25)

The students' critical engagement with ways to better appropriate the cultural influences of English-speaking countries seemed to present them an opportunity to ponder upon their Korean cultural identity, which ultimately led them to reevaluate it positively:

> I hope we have more respect and pride in the Korean culture. Korea is a country with a history of five thousand years, and is known for its tenacity for overcoming numerous hardships and adversities. We are also famous for achieving rapid economic growth, represented by the miracle of the Han River. Therefore, we do not have to feel inferior to the developed western countries and feel too humble about ourselves. I do agree that there are many cultural elements that we want to emulate in English-speaking countries, such as gender equality, forbearance toward the weak, and believing that all occupations are honorable, to name a few. However, we also have many positive cultural values such as the Confucianism culture and valuing the concept of *us* as a family. I hope that we strive to protect and preserve the cultural values and norms of Korea, while accepting and adopting western cultures judiciously. (Student 23)

The students' encounter with the presence of English-related cultural influences in Korea further allowed them to engage in deeper reflection on the phenomenon, making them consider a whole new perspective on it. Instead of interpreting the intangible desire for English and its culture rampant in Korea as something coerced by the sociocultural and economic power of developed western countries, the following student took it as rather a practical choice among Koreans to survive in the globalized world, emphasizing the agentive accommodation of Koreans:

> I think it is more appropriate to think that we are becoming modernized and pursuing convenience, not thoughtlessly accepting everything and following everyway that is American. In other words, I do not see our acceptance of American culture as unfortunate or negative. I think it is natural to pursue convenience in this fast-pacing era. … Of course I see that it is problematic to follow western cultures aimlessly and with no specific reasons. … However, this globalized world that we live in presents increasing cross-cultural encounters and exchanges: therefore, I do not have any problems with people following cultural behaviors that they believe are more convenient to them or with people who prefer to conform to hybrid cultural norms. … It does not have to be American culture that we look up to and follow. What we have chosen now is American, but it can change. By saying this, I might be perceived as a helpless supporter of America, but I am not. I can proudly say that I love and cherish the Korean culture more than anyone else. I am in love with Korean ceramics, traditional Korean clothes and houses, and the Korean traditional designs found in buildings, such as temples and palaces. (Student 17)

The critical literacy approach indeed invited the students to engage in critical reflection on power of English and its culture in addition to its manifestation in Korea, which they had never considered prior to taking the reading class. Through the process, they participated in negotiating cultural accommodation and appropriation from fresh perspectives while repositioning themselves as cosmopolitans living in the 21st century globalized world.

2. The Critical Literacy Approach: Increased Engagement in the Reading Class

As much as the students liked the fact that they had the opportunity to examine critically the issues that they previously had taken for granted when working on chapter two, they also spoke positively of the way the chapter two was carried out, i.e., the

critical approach to literacy. Responding to the critical literacy approach, the students articulated that they "[became] appreciative of taking the class" (Student 17) because they did "not expect that the general English reading class [would] be this impressive" (Student 1). Many students showed favorable attitudes toward the critical literacy approach, describing it as "novel" (Student 3, 6, 7, 13, 23, & 30) and "unique" (Student 28). The students commented that they were "not interested" (Student 13) in the "typical reading classes" (Student 4) in the general English program because they "resemble[d] the way they stud[ied] English in [their] high school years" (Student 13). Students found the critical literacy approach "interesting" (Student 4, 15, & 23) and "useful" (Student 7) as the new pedagogy encouraged them to "work in groups to share [their] ideas and present them in class" (Student 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 13, 15, & 23), thereby "breaking away from the traditional methodology of reading classes" (Student 1, 4, 9, 23, & 25). Commenting that they "really enjoy[ed] the critical literacy approach" (Student 3, 5, & 9), they expressed their "hopes that the general English reading classes [would] continue to use the new approach to working with the reading texts" (Student 9, 13, 19, 23, 26, & 37).

The students further believed that the critical literacy approach helped them develop a clearer understanding of the theme and contents of chapter two. They "really like[d]" the new pedagogy because, by participating in the project, they were able to "better understand the parts that [they] could not comprehend at first while reading and translating by [themselves]" (Student 15). Not only did they think positively of the critical literacy approach because it "encourage[d] [them] to reflect deeply on the topic and contents of the chapter" (Student 3 & 4), but they also thought that the critical literacy approach "[made] the contents of chapter two more memorable" (Student 29).

In addition, the students valued the critical literacy approach as it encouraged them "to participate" (Student 3, 27, 32, & 37) and to "express [their] thoughts and ideas" (Student 3), while discouraging the attitude of "just listening to the lecture" (Student 27) "passively" (Student 28 & 37). They thought that the critical literacy approach provided them with "a great opportunity to interact actively with classmates and to learn by doing instead of sitting back and passively translating the reading passages" (Student 28). Similarly, they "like[d] the new way of approaching reading as it made [them] truly engaged in learning by doing research on [their] own and presenting what [they had] found to classmates, which [was] quite different from the typical top-down approach" (Student 32):

> I really liked the way we worked on chapter two because the new pedagogy fostered us to actively take part in the class. The pedagogy further enabled us to learn the topic more clearly and to realize the importance of the topic. It was by far different from the way we studied other chapters in the book where the

> instructor gave us a lecture one-sidedly. (Student 10)

Students recounted that, by actively participating in the project and in the class, they were able to "move beyond just reading and translating" (Student 14) but were inclined to "engage more deeply in the topic presented in chapter two" (Student 13, 14, & 23), through which they came to "increase abilities to think critically and to express [their] thoughts and opinions more actively" (Student 13). They further expressed their satisfaction that "the class [did] not remain as one of those typical reading classes, but provide[d] meaningful time to raise consciousness on important issues and to develop [their] own ideas and positions toward them" (Student 26). The participatory aspect of the critical literacy approach was highly appreciated as the students regarded it as enabling them "to relate the topic presented to [their] own lives, to become enlightened on the issues [they had] never thought of, and to endeavor to search for ways to bring changes in [their] lives" (Student 31):

> The participatory approach to reading that we experienced in this class is the closest to my ideal pedagogy which I have always dreamed of to take part in. I hope that our university will apply this methodology for all general English reading classes. (Student 7)

The students further thought highly of the critical literacy approach because it made collaborative learning possible through small group work and whole-class presentation. The students thought that the project enriched their learning experience by "letting [them] listen to [their] group members' ideas" (Student 17). They also found it "useful" (Student 21) to listen to other groups' presentations which explored different aspects of the influences of English and its culture in the Korean society. They believed this collaborative atmosphere expanded their perspectives to a great extent:

> Through my participation in the group work, I was able to reconsider things that had never come across to my mind. While listening to my classmates' presentations, I learned a lot of new information that I had not been aware of, which I found very rewarding. I became more immersed in the reading class and found myself anticipating other groups' presentations because I was really curious about what my classmates might have prepared. (Student 15)

> As the topic of the group project was all different, I think the whole class was able to become acquainted with the wide variety of instantiation of the cultural influences of English-speaking countries in our everyday lives. When the topic of

> Hangeul, a language of our own, came up, I thought it was a great opportunity for all of us to engage in critical reflection on our own cultural identity. (Student 4)

> By listening to other group's presentations, I realized once again how widespread the cultural influences of English-speaking countries have been in Korea. I found the project work truly worthwhile because it allowed all of us to become more cognizant of the gravity of the cultural embeddedness of English-speaking countries in Korea. (Student 19)

3. Challenges

The students' positive experiences with the critical literacy approach were accompanied with challenges as well. While the students did not encounter setbacks when working on environmental issues in chapter one, a topic they were familiar with, they expressed "difficulties" (Student 4, 5, 17, 24, 27, 28, 35, & 37) in dealing with the topic of language, culture, and identity in chapter two. A few students commented that they could "not grasp the main point of the passage even after a few readings" (Student 17), and added that they "struggle[d] to translate and comprehend the main text of chapter two" (Student 24). The most challenging, however, was that they could "not get the feel of what [they] were supposed to do for [their] project on chapter two at the beginning" (Student 4). They not only did "not fully understand the theme of chapter two" (Student 5 & 24), but also "struggle[d] to select a topic for [their] project" (Student 37) as they thought that "the theme of chapter two [was] not common and rather symbolic" (Student 28).

Responding to students' initial struggle in working on chapter two, the instructor attributed their difficulties to her mismanagement. Different from chapter one for which she had spent more time to prepare, the instructor said that she was "pressed for time in preparing for chapter two" (Face-to-face interview). She added that she was "not 100% clear of what to do next and what to say to students in the class because [she] [was] not fully prepared to effectively conduct the lesson plans of chapter two" (Email interview 3). Although she "believe[d] in the importance of critical literacy" (Email interview 1) and knew that she "need[ed] to own the lessons to better assist students" (Face-to-face interview), she felt that she was "not well-prepared to instruct students to do the project well when working on chapter two" (Face-to-face interview). Although she tried, her lessons indeed seemed to have failed in fully contextualizing what was presented in the text within the students' immediate everyday lives by using an extended period of critical dialogue and problem-posing, thereby immersing students in the topic of language, identity and culture (Observation 2). She later commented that she found it "more

difficult to incorporate the critical literacy approach than she [had] expect[ed]," adding that she "[came] to learn more about critical literary by actually implementing it into [her] reading class" (Face-to-face interview).

These difficulties did not mean that the class for chapter two was not successful. Although the students agreed that they did not fully understand the theme and the project at the initial stage, they soon became better cognizant of the theme by discussing with their group members and listening to the special lecture. The students articulated that they "[could] focus on the scope of the project, while trying to find [their] own topic for the project by talking with [their] group members and sharing [their] experiences" (Student 28). They also said that they overcame the initial difficulties by "researching heavily … with [their] group members" (Student 24). "The special lecture" (Student 15, 17, 21, 24, 27, & 28) was also perceived as a substantial assistance. The students commented that it was "only after listening to the special lecture that [they] [could] better understand the project" (Student 17 & 28) and were "able to select [their] own project topic" (Student 24). The special lecture also "enable[d] [them] to look at the project within a larger framework, while letting [them] brainstorm more topics related to English and its cultural influences in Korea other than what [they had] derived at during a small group session" (Student 15). The instructor agreed that she also observed "several groups change[d] [their] project topics after listening to the special lecture" (Face-to-face interview), thus acknowledging that the special lecture did play a role in enhancing student understanding and therefore preparing better for their presentation.

The component of group presentation also seemed to help students understand better the gist of chapter two. The students found it "fruitful to listen to what other groups [had] prepared because it allow[ed] [them] to see the theme of chapter two from a different perspective" (Student 21). They further added that "watching classmates' presentations provoke[d] [them] to conduct a reality check on the widespread and deep-rooted influences of English-speaking cultures in Korea," which they considered "very meaningful" (Student 5 & 19). The students also liked listening to other groups' presentations because "what [their] classmates [had] prepared [was] different from [their] own presentation and therefore expand[ed] [their] knowledge horizon on the topic" (Student 19). "Listening to other groups' presentations" indeed seemed to help them "better understand the English-related cultural elements that [were] pervasive in [their] daily lives" (Student 37):

> I learned a lot about the theme of chapter two by listening to my classmates' presentations. Among the many interesting presentations, I found it most impressive when the issue of English replacing Korean was discussed. These days in Korea, one can easily hear English … on TV. There are more store signs

> in English than in Korean on the streets. Getting informed about these from listening to the presentations, I became more concerned about excessive and indiscriminate use of English in Korea, therefore resolving to use more Korean instead. (Student 37)

Not without some difficulties, the critical literacy approach was well perceived by the students as it allowed them not only to approach the issues related to English and its attached culture from a new perspective but also to foster student-oriented collaborative knowledge building through their active participation.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study explored the experiences of college freshmen and a novice instructor in a general English reading class that incorporated a critical approach to literacy, bringing to light the potential of critical literacy as a viable reading pedagogy in Korea. The findings demonstrated that the critical approach to literacy fostered students to read beyond the text, while enabling them to relate their reading practices to the larger sociocultural and political contexts and to ruminate on ways to bring positive changes into their immediate lives. More specifically, when the students were provided with the topical theme of English, culture, and identity that were extended from their textbook reading, they reached a new realization of the influences of English and its culture, which has become deeply rooted and widespread in Korea. With their critical encounter with the prevailing influences of English and its culture through in-class discussions, a special lecture, and a small-group project work, the students began to take a critical approach toward the phenomenon, while reflecting critically upon ways to better accommodate and appropriate the cultural influences of English in Korea.

The critical literacy approach was positively perceived by the students because it not only enabled them to raise critical consciousness of the important issues pertinent to their everyday lives, but also helped them to think critically, to be confidently assertive, and to seek ways to effect changes, which they believed was far different from the typical grammar-translation and teacher-oriented methods of reading. The students also thought that engaging in group work and listening to their classmates' presentations were beneficial as the collaborative atmosphere not only helped them understand the text better but also enriched their learning experience in critical literacy. Despite their overall positive experience, they underwent some difficulties at the initial stage, which the instructor considered to be due to her inexperience in leading a critically oriented class. Despite her knowledge of and belief in critical literacy, she found it challenging to

implement the approach because she was not used to incorporate it into actual classroom instruction.

The findings of the present study correspond with those of previous studies guided largely by the Freirean critical literacy approach, which were conducted mostly in an English as a second language (ESL) context, in that the students in the study developed an ability to situate their reading practices within the larger sociopolitical context and became critically engaged in the issues presented in the reading, while envisioning for the possibility of bringing changes through critical literacy (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Frye, 1999; Graman, 1988; Ko, 2013; Rivera, 1999). What deserves further attention is that the students in the present study not only were capable of taking a critical attitude toward reading the world, but actually demonstrated their willingness to be involved in the student-initiated and collaborative knowledge construction. The students' active participation in the joint inquiry and in collaborative action of searching for change in the study differs greatly from the stereotypical images of Asian students in TESOL literature who prefer to be passive participants in teacher-fronted lectures (cf. Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jones, 1999). Given that we only have a handful of research examining the possibility of critical literacy in the Korean context, the students' positive experience in the critically oriented class in the present study directs our attention to the great potential of the critical approach to literacy as a feasible option for effective reading pedagogy in Korea, adding to the current collaborative efforts of TESOL professionals to strengthen the curriculum of general English programs at the collegiate level by presenting one alternative among the many ways of enriching the experiences of college students in English classrooms (Bang, 2014; Byun, 2014; Ha, 2010; Jung, 2008; K. J. Kim, 2006; Y. Kim, 2012; Kim & Lim, 2013; Kwon, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2011; Oh, 2010).

For successful diffusion of the critical approach to literacy in general English programs in Korea, teacher education should precede actual implementation. As shown in the present study, teachers' knowledge of and interest in the critical literacy approach is not sufficient for engaging students successfully in a dialogic process and in developing their critical consciousness on social issues, while improving their reading competency. The importance of teachers' expertise and experience in the critical literacy approach is also discussed in the studies of Suh and Huh (2014) and Kim and Na (2015). Yang, O, and Kim's (2009) study on college instructors' limited construction of reading as a product and their instructional emphasis on students' functional skills further confirms the need for teacher training, which will serve to bring their attention not only to the diverse ways of improving students' reading skills but also to the sociopolitical nature of language and literacy.

Moving beyond the typical one-time seminar that superficially covers a new pedagogy

and thereby reduces it to the level of techniques, I argue for offering teachers with a sustained encounter with the critical approach to literacy and a phased systematic support at the university level. Initial teacher training can be followed by regular workshops where instructors gather and share their instructional successes and difficulties in implementing critical literacy in their classrooms. If a large-scale curriculum change in the general English program is not viable, elective reading classes in which instructors are unrestricted from a fixed curriculum and where more advanced learners participate in the lessons might be an optional setting to employ critical literacy. For teacher training where there are only a small number of instructors incorporating critically literacy, collaborative action research will be a desirable option. Conducting action research and sharing their results would surely contribute not only to the collective learning of instructors but also to the improvement of general English reading classes. As collaborative learning was favorably perceived among the college students in the present study, collaborative learning to teach for instructors is expected to benefit their professional development.

Given that research on critical literacy in Korea has been scarce, more studies are in need to examine and report the diverse ways of implementing the critical approach to literacy while engaging students at different levels to read beyond and against the text. As the present study focused mainly on students' experiences in the critical literacy class, studies that foreground the experiences of instructors merit further exploration, improving our current understanding by highlighting the issues and challenges of teachers in incorporating critical literacy into their classrooms. Studies that investigate the experiences of instructors' sustained engagement in teacher training via regular workshops or that investigate instructors' experiences of collaborative action research do warrant our further attention.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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