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Promoting an Awareness of Sociocultural Linguistics in the EFL Classroom

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Understanding the inherent, interrelated relationship between language and socioculture has been widely recognized as an indispensable element of language learning. This is particularly relevant in light of the plethora of World Englishes currently being used around the globe. However, few studies have examined specific means by which this awareness can be promoted in the EFL classroom. The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions of 80 Korean university English majors to an EFL activity that promotes an understanding of sociocultural linguistics. By examining sets of English and Korean sentences and comparing the participants' translations of Korean and English sentences, the participants were asked to share their perceptions of sociocultural concepts embedded within the two languages. The participants identified ten such concepts which were related to lexical and grammatical characteristics of the languages. These included the use of personal pronouns, honorification, family-related and gender-specific vocabulary, word order, and the use of subjects, verb tenses, prepositions, articles, and plural versus singular nouns. In addition, the high majority stated the activity had promoted their understanding of the relationship between culture and language. The results of this study have a number of significant implications for educators and learners.

[Sociocultural Linguistics/World Englishes/EFL Pedagogy/Language and Culture]

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I. INTRODUCTION

A significant dilemma faced by English language educators in today's interconnected and divergent world is how to promote meaningful learning in the classroom within the context of the diversity of the language that currently exists. This is especially relevant considering that "More than 80% of communicative events in English that are currently taking place around the world are between so-called 'non-native' speakers of the language" (Sharifian, 2017, p. 102) and that many attempts to come to terms with the present multifariousness nature of English, such as Kachru's Concentric Circles of English (1992), are seen as outdated or oversimplified (Canagarajah, 2003; Martin, 2014). Barratt (2016) writes that, "Even within the inner circle, there are many Englishes and no standard English that everyone agrees on, and even within a single inner circle country, such as the United Kingdom or the United States, great variation exists…" (p. 4). With this in mind, how then do English instructors, particularly in the outer and expanding circles, deal with this overwhelming complexity when tasked with improving the English proficiency of their students? Which standard or form of English do they focus on in the classroom and what pedagogical approaches do they adapt in order to meet the needs of their students? As Sharifian (2017) states, "With the emergence of world Englishes and the increase of intercultural communication, both of which are a result of globalisation and transcultural mobility, the call for new notions of 'competence' to be applied to successful intercultural communication continues unabated" (p. 101).

In recent years, paradigms and concepts that have emerged to promote awareness of the current state of English usage include World Englishes, English as an International Language, English as a Lingua Franca, English as a Global Language, and English as a Family of Languages. A number of pedagogies, several promoted within the context of the above paradigms, have also been suggested. Some of these include Dynamic Pedagogy (Mahboob & Dutcher, 2014), Corpus Pedagogy (Hadikin, 2014; McEnery & Xiao, 2011) Brain-based Pedagogy (Hermann, 2016), Genre Pedagogy (Hyland, 2007; Millar, 2011; Paltridge, 2001), Critical Pedagogy (Crookes, 2017; Green, Ahn, & Bae, 2015; Huang, 2009; Pennycook, 2001; Shin , 2004), and Creativity Pedagogy (Barratt, 2016).

One additional paradigm that has generated a number of pedagogical approaches appropriate for the needs of today's English language learners and teachers has been labeled English as an Intercultural Language (EIcL) (Green & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2013; Sifakis, 2003). Although this approach accepts and encourages a number of the tenets of the above paradigms, one aspect of EIcL that makes it unique is its focus on the promotion of intercultural awareness, competence and empathy (Byram, 1988). As part of this emphasis, an understanding of culture as "a dynamic, contextual, multidimensional process"

as opposed to "a fixed set of rules, values and behavior" (Green & Lee, 2018, p. 320) and an awareness of the intertwined connection between culture and language are essential.

It is with this latter premise that the field of sociocultural linguistics (also referred to as cultural linguistics and ethnolinguistics) plays an important role. As Shin and Jang (2018) report, "With the increasing interest in the relationship between language and social transformations such as globalization, recent scholarship in sociolinguistics has begun to investigate language practices and ideologies from sociocultural and critical perspectives" (p. 118). According to Sharifian (2017), the aim of sociocultural linguistics is to examine the relationship between language and culture, that is, to "engage with features of human languages that encode or instantiate culturally constructed conceptualisations encompassing the whole range of human experience" (p. 2). In other words, Sharifian (2017) explains, "many features of human languages are entrenched or embedded in cultural conceptualisations" (p. 2).

Despite acknowledgment of the vital function sociocultural linguistics serves in language education, few educators have examined specific pedagogical approaches that promote an awareness of the concepts associated with this field in the EFL classroom. With this in mind, the goal of this study is to identify the perceptions of 80 Korean university students majoring in English at the undergraduate and graduate levels to a classroom activity aimed at enhancing students' understanding of the relationship between language and culture. The activity used for the study, which had three parts, asked participants to hypothesize about ways in which sociocultural concepts might be embedded in the Korean and English languages. Following the activity, the participants completed a questionnaire which measured their perceptions of the activity itself and its impact on their awareness of the socioculture-language connection.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Study of Sociocultural Linguistics

One of the main premises of sociocultural linguistics, which Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define as, "the broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society" (p. 586), is that "language and culture are intertwined to such an extent whereas one cannot survive without the other" (Leveridge, 2008, p. 4). With this understanding, it is clear that learning a new language involves the learning of a new socioculture (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Gussabi, 2005; Janda, 2016) and that, in fact, "Language teaching is cultural teaching" (Choudbury, 2013, p. 21). Emphasizing this point, Xu (2014) maintains that the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence is

only part of the goal for learners of Asian Englishes; the understanding of cultural conceptualisations and development of multicultural competence is also required.

Sociocultural linguists point out that culture is generally embedded or evident in language through both lexical and grammatical characteristics (Janda, 2016). When learning a second or foreign language, therefore, one is clearly internalizing the culture embedded in that language, but that internalization is not necessarily one-sided. Related to the use of English, Sharifian (2017) writes, "Many communities of speakers, all around the world, have adopted English and adapted it for their own use, to encode and express their own cultural conceptualisations and worldview" (p. 85). Using Aboriginal speakers of English as an example, Malcolm (2017) suggests this process of adaptation involves four stages: *retention* ("the maintenance of features characteristic to the input variety"), *elimination* ("non-occurrence of features that could have been inherited from the input variety but were not"), *modification* ("where features are modified"), and *extension* ("where features are transferred from local languages") (Sharifian, 2017, p. 86).

2. Related Sociocultural Linguistic Studies

Whitman (2017) has written that "Korea has been under such an intense influence throughout history, especially from China, that in lots of ways the most important legacy of Korean culture is its language and its unique writing system" (p. 1). If this is the case, then sociocultural linguistic studies of the Korean language are of particular importance.

In one such study, Jendraschek (2009) reports that a major sociocultural aspect of Korean language use is honorification. This manifests itself in the use of pronouns, titles, speech styles, and lexicon. According to the author, "Lexical and grammatical choices (in Korean) are determined by the social status, age, and (in some cases) also gender" (p. 15). Lee, (1996) and Suh (1978) have also investigated ways in which honorification in Korean is related to relative social status.

In another study, Moen (2009) speculated that, "Korean grammar reinforces Confucian hierarchies by using grammatical endings based on Confucian relationships" (p. 3) and reported that lexicon in both English and Korean that express emotions have sociocultural meanings. Related to the expression of emotions, Kim (1978) reported 27 differences in the levels of emotion used in Korean and English. According to the author, there are more words that express sadness in Korean and an overlapping of the concepts of shyness and sadness in Korean. Another author, Kim (2012), has discussed how the metaphors used in Korean have specific sociocultural meanings.

In a study that compared Korean and English through an analysis of word connotations, syntactic differences, and terms of address, Chang (2010) identified several sociocultural concepts represented in both languages. These concepts included the use of honorifics in

Korean, which the author maintained, "stems from the Confucian value of respecting others and humbling oneself" (p. 136); the use of "our" in Korean versus "my" in English, possibly representative of a collectivist versus individualistic mind set; differences in responses to yes/no questions, which could represent a *self* /*other* orientation; differences in connotation between Korean terms and their English equivalents (e.g. *gohyang* versus *hometown*); and syntactic differences (e.g., the omission of personal nouns and pronouns in Korean). Babe (2017) also maintains that the common use of the personal pronoun "our" in Korea has sociocultural connotations related to the nation's "collectivist culture" and "communal values."

III. METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of university students in Korea to an EFL classroom activity aimed at enhancing participants' awareness of sociocultural linguistics and the relationship between socioculture and language. The objective of the activity used for this study was to enhance the participants' understanding of the language-socioculture connection by asking them to consider sociocultural aspects represented within both the English and Korean languages. In order to accomplish this goal, the participants examined pairs of English and Korean sentences, translated both English and Korean sentences, and took part in small focus group discussions.

1. Participants

Eighty participants took part in this study; all participants were English majors enrolled in a public university located in a southern province of the Republic of Korea. At the undergraduate level, 18 of the participants were sophomores, 33 were juniors, and 24 were seniors; 5 of the participants were graduate students in a Masters' degree course. Forty four of the participants were female and 36 were male. At the time of the study, all participants were enrolled in one of four courses (three undergraduate and one graduate) offered by the English Department of the university and taught by a native speaker of English. The activity was conducted a total of four times, one time for each course. Class size ranged from 5 students (in the graduate class) to 33 students (in one of the undergraduate classes). This instructor was also one of the researchers for the study; the other researcher was a bilingual speaker of Korean and English.

2. Research Design and Procedures

The participants all took part in a 60-75 minute classroom activity called *What's in a Sentence?* (Appendix), the purpose of which was to promote the participants' awareness of sociocultural linguistics and the relationship between language and culture. There were three parts to the activity. In Part One, the students were asked to examine five sets of sentences in English and Korean that had similar meanings. All sentences in this section were written by the researchers. After examining these sentences, the participants were asked to discuss the following questions in their groups: *Do you notice any differences in grammatical structure or word usage that might represent the different cultural values of those using the languages? If so, what are these differences? What do you think the differences mean?* After 15-20 minutes, each group summarized their opinions to the class. The participants were instructed that they could use either English or Korean for both the group discussions and the summary.

In Part Two of the activity, the participants were asked to individually translate five English sentences into Korean. In Part Three, they were requested to translate five Korean sentences into English. Before doing this translating, the instructor informed the participants that they should attempt to convey the meaning of the English and Korean sentences in the "most natural" form of the other language as possible and not to worry too much about grammatical accuracy and spelling. All sentences in these sections had been written by the researchers.

After approximately 15 minutes, all participants were asked to compare their individual translations with one or two other students and discuss the following questions for both Parts Two and Three: *Were your translations the same as your partner(s)? If not, how and why do you think they were different? If they were different, do you think there are any differences that have to do with cultural values represented in the two languages?* The participants were given another 15 minutes for this discussion. Following that, the instructor asked each group to summarize their opinions to the class. The participants were instructed that they could use either English or Korean for both the group discussions and the summary.

The instructor took notes of both the summary and the small group discussions for all parts of this activity, and the participants' comments in the summary sections were recorded. The participants were informed beforehand that their comments would be recorded. Once both summary sections were completed, the participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire with the following yes/no questions:

1) *Do you think this activity helped you become more aware of the connection between culture and language?*
2) *Before this activity, had you ever thought about the connection between culture and*

language?

3) *In your other EFL classes in Korea, have you ever talked about the connection between culture and language before?*
4) *Would you recommend this activity to other university students in Korea?*

3. Data Analysis

Following the completion of the classroom activity, the recordings and notes for each class were reviewed and coded by both researchers in order to incorporate a form of triangulation. In the process of coding, the following three steps were followed: description, analysis, and interpretation (Glesne, 2006). The researchers did not rely on a pre-assigned coding system in order to more accurately identify themes which emerged from the data and were not pre-determined or prejudiced by the researchers' interpretations or expectations. In addition, special attention was paid to identifying themes related to sociocultural linguistics, but symbolic interaction, ethnographic, and critical theory themes were also taken into account (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

When analyzing the results of the written questionnaire, simple percentages were assigned the number of *yes* and *no* answers for each of the four questions.

4. Limitations of the Study

When reviewing the results of this study, the following limitations should be taken into consideration. As in many focus group discussions, some participants spoke more than others; therefore, there is the possibility that not all the opinions and perceptions of the participants were identified. To offset this limitation, the participants were given the opportunity to share their opinions and solidify their perceptions by speaking in small groups before summarizing their discussions to the class.

The fact that the participants used English to express their opinions might also have influenced the results. Even though they were informed that they could use Korean if they chose to, no participants made this choice. The results might have varied if the participants had used their native language.

In addition, there is always a danger in studies of this type that the discussion might engender stereotypes about cultures. To counteract this possibility, specific mention was made of fact that the purpose of the study was not to correctly identify aspects of socioculture embedded within the Korean and English languages, only to hypothesize about what those aspects might be and to think about the connection between language and culture. Participants were also warned of the dangers of making stereotypes.

Finally, it's possible that the researchers' biases or perceptions influenced the responses

of the participants. In choosing the example sentences for the activity, the researchers chose specific sentences in which the possibility of sociocultural linguistic differences might be present. A selection of other sentences might have resulted in different findings.

IV. FINGINGS

1. Perceptions of Activity

The results of the responses to the post-activity questionnaire are illustrated in Table 1. Two questions in this questionnaire were aimed at identifying the participants' perceptions of the classroom activity used in this study. In this regard, a high majority of participants, 93% (74), stated that this activity had helped them "become more aware of the connection between socioculture and language." When asked if they would "recommend this activity to other university students in Korea," 88% (70) responded affirmatively and 12% (10) said *no*.

Two other questions focused on identifying the participants' pre-study socioculture-language knowledge and experience. When asked if they had thought about "the connection between socioculture and language" before taking part in this activity, 76% (61) said they had not and 24% (19) said they had. Finally, 83% (66) of the participants stated that they had never "discussed the connection between socioculture and language" in their EFL classes in Korea before, while 17% (14) said they had.

TABLE 1
Perceptions of Activity

Questions	Yes	No
Do you think this activity helped you become more aware of the connection between socioculture and language?	93% (74)	7% (6)
Would you recommend this activity to other university students in Korea?	88% (70)	12% (10)
Before this activity, had you ever thought about the connection between socioculture and language?	24% (19)	76% (61)
In your other EFL classes in Korea, have you ever discussed the connection between socioculture and language before?	17% (14)	83% (66)

2. Sociocultural Aspects Identified

The participants of this study identified ten sociocultural aspects embedded within the Korean and English languages (Table 2). The most commonly identified sociocultural

linguistic aspect was the difference in the use of "my" in English and "our" in Korean as possessive pronouns. As one participant hypothesized, "In Korea the group is important. But in English the individual is important." In other words, there is more of an emphasis on collectivism represented in the Korean language versus an emphasis on individualism represented in English. In the words of another student, "When we (Koreans) think of something like family, country, or something like that we think it belongs to us – the group. But I think in English they think things belongs to a person first – the individual" [sic].

The second most commonly identified aspect was the use of honorification in Korean. The participants generally called this "polite language." In explanation, the majority of participants who identified this aspect stated their belief that honorification represents the importance of observing a person's age or social status in Korean. "When I talk to someone older in Korean, or like my parents, I should have respect. So I must speak politely" [sic]. When speaking English, five students stated that it isn't as important to take into consideration social status or age when speaking to someone. "This is a difference in culture," one participant said. "English is more relaxed" [sic].

Two lexical components identified by the participants were family-related vocabulary and gender-specific vocabulary. The perception that there is more vocabulary for family members or relations in Korean than in English and that that vocabulary is generally more specific was expressed. Several participants expressed the opinion that this was representative of the importance of family relations in Korean. In the words of one participant, "Family relationship is important in Korea. And it's complicated" [sic]. The perception that in Korean it's often possible to tell if a sibling being discussed is older or younger just based on the vocabulary used is unique compared to English. Related to gender-specific vocabulary, one participant stated, "When I see a sentence in Korean, I sometimes can know if a man or woman is talking. But I usually can't in English." When asked about the possible reason for this, the opinion that considering gender is often important when using Korean was given.

Several participants also expressed the belief that personal subjects are often dropped or omitted when speaking in Korean whereas they are rarely omitted when speaking English. A possible reason given for this was the belief that, when speaking Korean, being able to infer or imply the subject of a sentence or conversation is important. "But in English," said one participant, "it's very clear. Even though you know who you mean, you must say 'you' or 'I'" [sic]. In the eyes of one participant, this difference represents the need to observe social situations and make inferences when speaking Korean as opposed to "the need to be more exact in English."

In addition, four grammatical characteristics of English and Korean were also mentioned by participants: the use of verb tenses, prepositions, articles, and plural/singular nouns.

Participants expressed the belief that it is more important to use verb tenses accurately in

English than it is in Korean. “I think English has more verb tenses than Korean,” said one participant. “And you have to be really careful how you use them. But in Korean we can usually understand even if you don’t use the verb tense exactly. To me, it seems that English speakers are more concerned about being accurate with time.” Other participants expressed the opinion that using prepositions correctly in English is more important than it is in Korean. One participant said, “English has too many prepositions and it’s really hard to use them right.” The same was true for the use of articles and plural versus singular nouns in English according to several participants. In the words of one participant, “English is more exact and precise about grammar like this. In this way, English is more scientific than Korean. To me, this says something about the cultures.”

Finally, one participant identified word order or sentence structure as a sociocultural linguistics difference between English and Korean. According to this participant’s opinion, “I think that in English the stress is on the subject or the person or thing doing the action. But in Korean, the emphasis is on the object or action. I don’t really know the reason, but this could show a more individual approach in English than in Korean.”

TABLE 2
Identified Sociocultural Concepts

Concepts Identified	Possible Reasons
Possessive Pronouns (“my” vs. “our”)	Korean shows emphasis on collectivism/English shows emphasis on individualism; group vs. individual mindsets
Use of Honorifics	Korean places more emphasis on social status and age – stresses Confucian values; English more “informal”
Vocabulary for family/relatives	Korean has more specific vocabulary for family relations – stresses importance of family relationships
Gender-specific vocabulary	Korean uses more gender-specific vocabulary – it is often clear which gender is speaking; demonstrates importance of gender in society
Use of personal subjects	Personal subjects often omitted in Korean – subject implied based on context of conversation; demonstrates importance of observing social situations
Use of verb tenses	Verb tenses more commonly used in English – emphasizes importance of time and detail
Use of prepositions	English has more prepositions; their exact use more important; represents “scientific” perspective
Use of articles	English places more emphasis on precise use of articles; represents “scientific” perspective
Use of plural nouns	English places more emphasis on precise use of plural vs. singular nouns; represents “scientific” perspective
Word order	English word order (s+v) places more emphasis on subject as opposed to action or object; possibly represents an individualistic perspective

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of the activity used in this study was to promote an awareness of the relationship between socioculture and language as well as an understanding of sociocultural linguistics among Korean university students. To this end, there is evidence in the findings that this objective was met. The fact that 93% of the participants stated the activity had helped them gain a better understanding of the socioculture-language relationship strongly suggests the activity was successful in this regard. In addition, the recommendation by 88% of the participants that other Korean university students take part in the activity used for this study is also testament to the value the participants placed on the activity and its objectives.

Perhaps more importantly, through their participation in this classroom activity, the participants identified ten specific grammatical and lexical aspects of socioculture represented within the English and Korean languages. This is another indicator that the students' awareness of sociocultural linguistics was enhanced. Even though it must be recognized that the participants of this study were not trained sociocultural linguists, their perceptions of these sociocultural aspects sheds light on the sociocultural aspects of both of these languages, confirms the findings of several previous studies, and has a number of significant implications for educators and language learners.

The two most commonly identified sociocultural aspects in this study were the differences in use of the personal pronouns "my" and "our" and the use of honorification in Korean. Both of these aspects have been identified in prior studies. Babe (2017) and Chang (2010) discuss the *my/our* dichotomy, and Chang (2010), Jendraschek (2009), Lee (1996), and Suh (1978) all report the role that honorification in Korean plays in demonstrating one aspect of the socioculture of Korean. A number of sociocultural factors identified in previous studies, such as the use of vocabulary which expresses emotion (Kim , 1978), the use of metaphor (Kim 2012), and responses to yes/no questions (Chang, 2010) were not identified by the participants of this study. On the other hand, many of the sociocultural representations identified in this study (i.e., family-related and gender-specific vocabulary, omission of subjects, and use of prepositions, articles, and plural nouns, and word order) do not seem to have been reported in the literature. Having the input of both "professional" and "amateur sociocultural linguists," if the participants in this study can be seen as such, provides a more holistic, robust, and balanced perspective of the field, a fact that provides sufficient justification for studies such as this.

However, the responses to two of the questions on the questionnaire used for this study provide perhaps the best incentive for educators to conduct similar studies and promote an awareness of the sociocultural linguistics in the EFL classroom. The fact that 76% of the participants stated they had not thought previously considered the connection between

socioculture and language and 83% had not discussed this connection in other EFL courses is a stark reminder of the necessity of pedagogical approaches that attempt to facilitate this awareness. The lack of previous consideration of or conscious thought about the socioculture-language relationship on the part of the participants, who had all been learning English as a foreign language since their elementary school days, has considerable implications. Without a critical awareness of and insight into the ways in which socioculture is embedded in language, learners are merely absorbing socioculture without realizing it. In other words, they are subconsciously acquiring the sociocultural concepts embedded in the languages they are learning without a clear realization or understanding of the impact this has on them as individuals and their society as a whole. This impedes them from making informed decisions about their learning and having an accurate view of the consequences of their actions. Only by actively promoting a critical understanding of sociocultural linguistics and its implications can educators and learners be empowered to truly understand others and themselves as well as take part in meaningful intercultural communication.

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APPENDIX

Handout for *What's in a Sentence?*

Part One - Look at the pairs of English and Korean sentences below. Although they may not be literal translations of each other, they are meant to represent similar ideas. Do you notice any differences in grammatical structure or word usage that might represent the different cultural values of those using the languages? If so, what are these differences? What do you think the differences mean?

1) My father works in an international trading company.
우리아버지는 국제무역회사에서 일하십니다.

2) There are many things I like about my country.
나는 우리나라에 대하여 좋아하는 것들이 많이 있습니다.

3) Where do you live?
어디 사십니까?

4) This is my brother.
이 사람이 우리 형입니다.

5) I put the dishes on the table.
식탁에 그릇을 놓았다.

Part Two – Translate the following sentences from English to Korean and then compare your translations to another student's. After that, discuss the questions below with your partner.

1) How do you know that guy?

2) My family's been living in my hometown for many generations.

3) Would you like a cup of ice coffee?

4) My sister knows a lot about computers.

5) She had a cold so she couldn't come to class.

Were your translations the same? If not, how and why do you think they were different? Looking at your translations, are they exactly the same (grammar, vocabulary, word order. etc.) as the original English text? If not, do you think there are any differences that have to do with different cultural values represented in the two languages?

Part Three – Translate the following sentences from Korean to English and then compare your translations to another student's.

1) 우리 학교 선배들은 영어를 잘 한다.

2) 이 곰탕은 좀 싱겁다.

3) 마음이 좀 찹잡하다.

4) 탤런트가 되고 싶어요.

5) 그 남자의 마음이 왔다 갔다 한다.

Again, were your translations the same? If not, how and why do you think they were different? Looking at your translations, do you think they are exactly the same (grammar, vocabulary, word order. etc.) as the original Korean text? If not, do you think there are any differences that have to do with different cultural values represented in the language?

Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Level: Secondary

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