English Language & Literature Teaching, Vol. 19, No. 1 Spring 2013

Same Environment, Different Affordances: Ecological Analysis of Four Different Learners in a University Context

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Kim, Miso & Kim, Tae-Young (2013). Same environment, different affordances: Ecological analysis of four different learners in a university context. *English Language & Literature Teaching, 19*(1), 133-155.

This study investigates the subjective realization of objective environmental factors and learners' agency in constructing their meaning potential. According to van Lier's (2000, 2002, 2004) ecological perspective, the environment is yet an unrealized set of potential, and affordance is what was felt meaningful to the learner. Also, learners actively construct their terms and conditions of learning with their agency (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Based on van Lier's ecological framework, two pairs of students enrolled in two same English classes were recruited. Life history, semi-structured interview, and task recall data revealed that for some students, affordance of the English classroom was no more than a mandatory class for graduation, while for others, it was a valuable opportunity to achieve their speaking-related goal. Although all participants are active agents of their lives, in the English class, some of them did not exercise their agency, as the class was not perceived important to them. The difference of affordance and agency among participants was due to multifarious individual backgrounds and personal factors. The same environment produced different affordances, and the affordances then generated different activities. This study implies that the environment should be meaningful to learners and moreover, their personal background should be carefully considered in the study of learner individual differences.

[ecological perspective/affordance/EFL/environment/agency]

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper shifts the focus of foreign language (FL) learning environment from objective and observable factors to learners' agentic perception in realizing the potential meaningfulness of their environment. To date, studies on EFL learning environment have addressed the characteristics and constructive implications to improve the environment, such as environmental effects on learner-internal factors, effectiveness of CALL in classroom environment, and interactions taking place in classrooms (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2012; Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Lim & Shim, 2008; Shin & Lee, 2011). On the contrary, the learners' meaningful realization of the learning environment and their agency to construct the environment were mostly absent from the studies. The learners' subjective perception of the given environment is called affordances (van Lier, 1997, 2000), which brings the learners to the center of inquiry of EFL environment. The affordance is shaped by active exercise of learners' agency (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001) as they interact within the environment. The participants of this study share the same environment, including the same English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the same English class, and an equal opportunity to access English. This paper aims to describe the differences in the affordances of four learners within the same environment, with a focus on their active agency in constructing their own affordance.

In order to build a bridge between the studies of objective elements in the EFL environment and learners' differential perception of the environment with their agency, the two research questions are postulated:

1. How do the participants perceive their environment in different ways?
2. How have the students exercised their agency in constructing their affordances?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Previous Studies on English as a Foreign Language Environment

The distinction between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is drawn to the status of English in learners' environment. Kachru (1992), in discussing World Englishes, categorized the sociolinguistic profile of English in terms of three concentric circles: (1) the inner circle, where English is spoken as the primary first language; (2) the outer circle, where institutionalized non-native varieties of English (i.e., ESL) are used; (3) the expanding circle, where English does not hold an official status (i.e., EFL). With this broad framework of sociocultural context as a starting point, we introduce

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the previous studies on the expanding circle (e.g., EFL) and then suggest the results of these studies.

In discussing the English learning environment in South Korea, it is essential to recognize that English has no official status in Korea. Korea recognizes Korean as the only official language (Korea Ministry of Government Legislation, 2012) although registering English as an additional official language is a very heated debate still ongoing in Korea (Ahn, Lim, & Suh, 2005; Paik, 2000). Specifically, the Korean environment belongs to the expanding circle where English is treated primarily as a FL, and thus, English does not hold an institutionalized status (Kachru, 1992, 1998) as countries in the outer circle does (e.g., India and the Philippines). Therefore, English is spoken neither in everyday conversation nor in official contexts; rather, English holds the status of a highly important school subject in Korea, which is taught from Grade 3 to Grade 12 in Korean elementary and secondary schools.

Recognizing the status of English, studies on EFL learning environment are of direct relation to English education in Korea. Due to the relative difficulty of accessing authentic language and meaningful interaction in English in the EFL setting, studies on EFL environment issues have been centered on: (1) learner-internal factors (Cho, 2012; Kim, 2006, 2010; Kim & Seo, 2012; Shin & Lee, 2011; Warden & Lin, 2000); (2) application of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Lee, 2009; Timuçin, 2006; Wible, Kuo, Chien, Liu & Tsao, 2001; Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009); (3) instructional context (Bacha, 2010; Morell, 2004); and (4) classroom interaction (Lim & Shim, 2008; Woo, 2012). Studies on learner-internal factors place their primary focus on the environmental effect on student motivation and affective factors. In turn, CALL research in the EFL context aims to improve the classroom environment itself by applying computer-based tools. The third type of research examines EFL classroom lectures and methods of teaching. Lastly, studies on classroom interaction closely analyze the interaction between teachers and students, feedback, negotiation of meaning, and questions in the EFL classroom. The studies shed light on various aspects of EFL environment with various focuses, leaving meaningful implications on improving the environment. But those studies yet do not directly addresses the issue of learners' active role of perceiving and constructing the environment by their own.

The environment is neither objective nor absolute. It is flexible, relative, and subject to the learners' subjective perception. Even if two learners are in the exactly same environment in terms of objective factors, the two learners would perceive the environment differently, as their life histories, identities, and value systems are unique and therefore progress dynamically.

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2. Toward an Ecological Perspective: Affordance and Environment

The difference in perceiving the same environment is well reflected in an ecological way of viewing SLA, suggested by van Lier (1997, 2000, 2004). This ecological perspective, according to him, is "a conception of the learning environment as a complex adaptive system, of the mind as the totality of relationships between a developing person and surrounding world, and of learning as the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment" (1997, p. 783). Challenging the psychometric research paradigms, his perspective regards language learning as relations of thought, action, and power, rather than as disconnected, external objects (van Lier, 2000).

This ecological perspective has originated from Gibson's (1979) view of ecological thinking. Ecology, by its dictionary definition, is an area of inquiry which examines the relationships among living organisms and the environment, specifically situated in ecosystems. In bringing the ecological way of thinking, psychologist James Gibson first distinguished environment and affordance. According to Gibson and Pick (1986, p. 14), "the environment provides opportunities and resources for action, and information for what is to be perceived so as to guide action," whereas an affordance is defined as "what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). In other words, the environment is an object set of resources and opportunities, which might be available to an organism, and the environment transforms into an affordance only if the environment is realized meaningful by the particular organism living in the environment. Gibson's way of conceptualizing the environment has acknowledged the relativity and subjectivity of perceiving an objective environment by different agents in the ecosystem.

Applying this perspective to second language learning allows us to conceive the importance of the environment from the learners' point of view, rather than as an objective set of variables and features which places limitation on the learner. This ecological perspective explains the environment as being full of potential meanings. According to van Lier, "these meanings become available gradually as the learner acts and interacts within and with this environment" (2000, p. 246). In this view, the environment is full of potential, and it becomes meaningful to the learner only if the potential is realized by the learner. The realized potential is then called affordance, meaning "what is available to the person to do something with" (2004, p. 90). The process of learning inherently involves consequent realization of potential meanings diluted in the environment. This realized potential, namely affordance, is the world in which the learner engages in, whereas environmental factors which are not realized remain as they are. Therefore, this ecological perspective of language learning brings the relationship between the learner and the environment to the center of the inquiry.

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Kim's (2010, in press) studies shed light on the subjective perception of participants' surroundings in the ecological framework. Hana and Chang, the core participants of Kim's (2010) study, were Korean undergraduate students studying in Canada for seven to twelve months, respectively. According to Kim, goal alignment and meaningful L2 learning context affected meaningful construction of affordances. Hana's goal was consistent throughout her study-abroad period and she was able to notice the gap between her ideal state and her current state (i.e., sensitization) from her observation of her Korean classmate, who was a highly competent speaker of English. Meanwhile, Chang's goal was ambivalent at first, and therefore did not actively participate in ESL classes, failing to take advantage of the contextual benefits. In the case of Chang, his L2 goal was immigration, which was discordant with other ESL students. Combined with the negative influence from his L1 community, his construction of affordance suffered, whereas Hana actively built her affordance based on consistent goal alignment and L2 learning experience throughout her study abroad.

Paul and Sandra in Kim's (in press) study shows similar finding. Both of them were recent immigrants to Canada, currently living in Toronto, and taking an English class from a governmental institution. They were highly skilled immigrants who had accumulated their professional experience before immigration. Accordingly, they sought job opportunities in their fields. As for Paul, he perceived native English speakers as an exclusive norm to follow, deprecating interactions among ESL students. Unlike Paul, Sandra enjoyed conversing in English regardless of her interlocutor's linguistic identity. In addition, she sensitively observed her surroundings and took advantage of her L2 learning environment extensively. This difference created idiosyncrasies in constructing affordances. Paul failed to create affordance that corresponded to his belief, because native English speakers were the only meaningful source of English according to his belief. Meanwhile, Sandra successfully transformed her environment into an affordance, due to the harmony among her belief and other contextual factors.

3. Learners as Agents in the EFL Environment

As discussed above, this ecological perspective places primary importance on learners' agency in realizing the meaning potential surrounding them. Considering the complexity and elusive nature of defining agency, Ahearn (2001) instead suggests a provisional definition, "agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). The term 'sociocultural' here is directly related to the issue of environment and individual learners, as learners are in charge of creating their own affordance, in the sociocultural environment given to them. In line with this definition, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) addressed that learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their

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own learning by exercising their human agency. They state that "human agency is about more than performance, or doing; it is intimately linked to significance. That is, things and events matter to people – their actions have meanings and interpretations" (p. 146). Extending the discussion, this view of agency opens up the possibility of applying agency into the Korean EFL setting as one of the sociocultural context where FL learning takes place.

Studies on agency in the L2 acquisition field have been focused on the lives of immigrants in diverse multicultural settings. In a study of four adolescent immigrants from China, McKay and Wong (1996) critically situate agency in power relation, reporting that "as subjects with agency and a need to exercise it, the learners, while positioned in power relations and subject to the influence of discourses, also resist positioning, attempt repositioning, and deploy discourses and counterdiscourses" (p. 603). In their view, agency is the deliberate human effort to negotiate their identity in power relations. Similarly, Norton (2001) illustrates how multiple identities of immigrant women affect their agency in increasing participation into the target community. Her study also draws agency in the power relation between the mainstream target community and the immigrants. According to the two studies, agency is considered as a deliberate effort to participate in the target community, where unequal power relation is assumed.

Upon this theoretical backdrop, this study focuses on the mediated capacity to act in a Korean EFL classroom setting. To date, studies on agency dealt with the target language speaking community (e.g., inner circle), where English is the medium of meaning co-construction (Ahearn, 2001). Bringing this framework into Korean context, this study would examine learners' agency in EFL classroom.

III. STUDY DESIGN

1. Participants

In order to examine how two or more students in the same classroom perceive the class differently, it was crucial to recruit participants who were taking the same English course. According to this recruitment criterion, two pairs of university students who were taking a mandatory English course were recruited. The profile of the participants is summarized in Table 1. All of them were notified that their personal information and interview data would be kept anonymous and thus, all names are pseudonyms.

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TABLE 1

Participants

Name	Years in School	Age	Gender	Major	Class
Sijoon	Freshman	23	Male	Sociology	A
Hani	Senior	22	Female	Anthropology	A
Dongjoo	Freshman	19	Male	Mechanical Engineering	B
Joomin	Freshman	19	Male	Mechanical Engineering	B

2. Data Collection and Analysis

The study period was from November to December 2012, approximately two months. At the beginning of this study period, we held an orientation with each pair of participants, explaining the purpose of this study, telling them what to do, making first interview appointments and answering their questions. At that time, they were asked to write two narratives, one about their life history and the other one about their English learning history, and to submit the narratives via e-mail one day prior to their interview date. As a result, all the participants sent the one-page-long narrative as requested. Based on the narratives and their information, interview questions asking about their environment, affordance, and agency were devised. At the first interview, each participant and the interviewer met one-to-one and questions related to the environment (both inside and outside of the classroom), affordance, agency, life history narrative, and English learning history were asked. Sample interview questions can be found in the Appendix. The second meeting consisted of a confirmation check of the previous interview along with task recalls they recently completed in their classrooms. The purpose of the task recalls was to observe how they perceive activities in the class in different ways. During the sessions, the participants were asked to perform the tasks once again and share their opinion on the tasks. The topic of the target unit was prenuptial contract. Activities included the following: picture description task, multiple choice, reading aloud, discussion, and choosing the appropriate word. All the interviews were semi-structured and held on a one-to-one basis. Basic question formats for the interviews were the same for all participants, except for the questions concerning their individual narratives.

3. Students Background Information

Sijoon and Hani, who were older students than Dongjoo and Joomin, were taking Class A. Sijoon's two narratives about his life history and English learning history revealed that he was an introvert who likes to read books, write stories, and daydream by himself. He

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had two years of experience studying English in the U.S.; first when he was in Grade 2 and the second year in Grade 8. The second time of studying abroad was an important turning point for raising self-awareness, because in both narratives, he stated that it was a nerve-wracking experience due to his inability to comprehend anything in the class. He felt like a fool. He could not help but study English and other school subjects after classes with English books, TV sitcoms and discussions. After returning to Korea, he prepared for a FL high school and passed the entrance exam. In recalling his memory of high school, he stated that all he did was study all day in a passive manner. All of the experiences in his life were not his choice, but someone else's, or the choice that the environment itself forced him to make. However, after he entered the university, he dropped out because of his vague dream and aptitude problems; however, this time, it was his own choice. Then he applied for another university. Before starting his second year in his new university, he joined the mandatory two-year military service. Upon completion of the military service, he returned to his new university.

Hani described herself as an outgoing, sociable and independent woman. Yet, she recalled that her past life was troublesome. When she was in Grade 8, she said that she suffered from bullying at her school due to her obesity. At that time, she thought, "if I study hard and enter a prestigious FL high school, my life would become much better." She studied English ardently, taking crash classes from several private institutes. Although she failed to enter her dream high school, she said that the experience enhanced the quality of her study during her high school years. When she was in her third year at high school, she applied for a university admission officers exam system, which does not reflect the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) score but her portfolio and her statement of purpose. Despite her teacher's neglect, she actively prepared for relevant experiences along with the necessary documents, and thereby finally passing the exam. After her admission, she did not remain in the varsity activities, but actively sought to experience various activities, including joining the orchestra and the debate club, promoting a mobile application company, and mentoring younger students. She will be applying for a graduate program of the same major at the same university; her dream is to work for adolescents or to be a marketer.

Dongjoo and Joomin were put in Class B. Dongjoo actively pursued his dream of becoming an air mechanic. When he was 11 years old, he was fascinated by airplanes and jet fighters. Since then, he dreamed of being an air-force pilot. In pursuit of his dream, he had been preparing for the Air Force Academy when he was a third-year student at his high school, but unfortunately failed. In addition, he found out that he was not qualified to be a pilot due to his medical history. He changed his dream from a pilot to becoming an air mechanic and decided to study mechanical engineering. He plans to study at a graduate school in order to fulfill his dream.

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Dongjoo began learning English since Grade 3 at a college English center run by native speakers. He stated that he preferred hanging out with his friends at the center so that he could speak English. Combined with his one-month study abroad experience in Australia, he mentioned that he could abandon the fear of speaking to native English speakers. From Grades 7 to 12, he was educated in the grammar translation method. At the time of the present study, he was planning to obtain a TOEFL score in order to apply for an exchange student program in Germany, as well as study for TEPS[1] in order to secure admissions to a graduate school related to his dream.

Before Grade 8, Joomin was known as a naughty boy who liked to conduct serious misdemeanor. At the time, his purpose of studying was to play bad mischief, because the teachers tended to be generous to smart kids. However, because of his serious fights with his friends, Joomin's parents were summoned to his school and had to make an official apology. Since then, he repented and studied wholeheartedly, and finally succeeded in entering a university. At the time of data collection, he had no specific plan except to join the mandatory military service in the upcoming year. He stated that he did not have a vivid dream, but believed that the two-year of military service would help him find one.

Two teachers exerted beneficial impact on the history of Joomin's English learning. From Grades 6 to 11, he learned English from only one male teacher at a *hakwon*. When he was asked the reason, he said that, "the teacher's teaching method was highly cramming and grammar-oriented. And he strictly punished misbehaving students, including me, very frequently. But he was very passionate and loved his students. Thanks to this teacher, I just slept during all English lessons in my school because they were too easy." The second person was his English teacher during Grade 11 who encouraged him to perform English plays and to take TEPS in preparation for university entrance exams. With the help of the two teachers, he obtained a perfect score in CSAT and succeeded in entering the university.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Different Affordances of the Same Environment

The objective environmental features can be summarized as follows. The English course they were taking was a mandatory prerequisite for graduation. Students who have a certain score in the English speaking test (TOEIC Speaking Level 7 or TOEFL iBT Speaking Section 26) can be exempt, but none of the participants had such a high score. The course

[1] The Test of English Proficiency was developed by Seoul National University. In Korea, this test is usually used for applying to graduate schools.

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was a two-credit course, consisting of three hours of classroom study per week. Primarily, the course aimed to improve both listening and speaking skills. The courses were task-based, and the uniform curriculum was adopted. Class A had 27 students and Class B had 18. Most of the students at the university took the course in their freshmen year. However, Class A was specially designed for older or returning students who could not take the course during their freshmen year. Hani and Sijoon were taking Class A, because they missed the class during the first year at the university. Both of them chose Class A without any particular reason. Class B was exclusively for freshmen majoring in mechanical engineering. Dongjoo and Joomin were put in the course, regardless of their intention to do so.

Assessment and grading in the two courses consist of two oral tests, one final test, assignments, classroom participation, and attendance. At the time of the present study, the participants had completed the first oral test.

In analyzing their affordance, their perception of the English class, including the instructor, syllabus, textbook, teaching methods, and tasks, would be summarized first, and the discussion of their outreach would follow.

As for Sijoon in Class A, task-based teaching of the teacher was not of any help, because he thought that the speaking competence of every student in the pair or group tasks was basically similar. He said that group members would say a string of few words and the teacher would not suggest a model dialogue to initiate the topic. In addition, he felt that the discussion tasks seemed inconsistent, in that they force them to speak regardless of their will and the teacher would not correct them. He believed that the teacher should intervene and correct the students; however, the teacher was distant from the students. The tasks were too easy and below his cognitive level, and the teacher did not have any intention to adjust the level, although all of her students consider the lesson too easy. He thought that the difficulty level of the class was two out of five points. His perception of the English classroom is well reflected in the following excerpt:

> *Excerpt* 1.
> Interviewer (I): Was the class helpful to your oral exam?
> Sijoon (S): No, frankly speaking… In my opinion, improvement of speaking competence through the class is limited. It (the exam) just… evaluates my current competence. Because… speaking just a few words in the class does not lead to improvement.

As he perceived the classroom in such a way, he did not put much effort into the class activities. Most of all, he disliked the final written test more than other evaluations. When asked the reason for such dislike, he said, "I do not have to study beforehand. But in the

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case of the final test, I have to study for it." His initial purpose of taking this class was just to fulfill the graduation requirement. When he was asked for other reasons, he hesitantly said, after a long pause, "Am I supposed to come up with a new purpose?" In terms of class grade, he did not work for an A+, but stated that any grade higher than B would be fine with him.

Hani describe the instructor and the class in a largely different way. Her original purpose of taking this class was basically the same; yet, she had an additional purpose. She was interested in taking the TOEIC speaking exam, as the test score was required in order to be hired at large-sized companies in Korea. Although she was not preparing for the exam at the moment of the data collection, she was keenly aware of the close relationship between the two, as shown in Excerpt 2.

> *Excerpt 2.*
> I: Do you have any purpose of taking this course, other than fulfilling the requirement?
> Hani (H): Hmm… This course helps prepare for the TOEIC speaking and practical English. … Really, in this class, picture descriptions, expressing my opinion, reading aloud … I heard that all the activities are the same in the TOEIC speaking test, and OPIc[2] test, as well. I just wanted to practice a lot this semester … This course directs us to do the activities. So it's useful.

Perceiving the unique personal meaningfulness of the course, her participation in the class and attitude toward the instructor were very active and favorable. In addition to the usefulness of the tasks in preparing for speaking tests, she liked befriending with the group members and speaking English with them. She believed her grade would be higher than B+, because she was confident in her participation in the class and received a relatively high score in the first speaking test (18 of 20). She evaluated that the level of difficulty fits her perfect. Her attitude toward the class is nicely depicted in Excerpt 3.

> *Excerpt 3.*
> I: What do you think of your instructor? Do you think the professor's teaching style matches your learning style?
> H: (In the class) Talking with friends and partners, socializing with them… (the tasks) all help me to get to know other partners. We talk about our lives, such as taking exams, working as a translator… To be honest, lots of (other) classes just

[2] OPIc measures the ability to speak appropriately in real life contexts. Either TOEIC Speaking or OPIc is required in order to be hired at large-sized companies in Korea.

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> end up with not talking anything, just listening to the instructor, reflecting on my own experience in other English conversation courses provided by the department of English language and literature. I like this active way of learning … My professor also knows me and pronounces my name correctly. … He often calls my name, too.

Notable is that while Sijoon saw the discussion activities meaningless, Hani evaluated them positively. Sijoon thought that speaking a mere string of words without explicit correction was not meaningful, whereas Hani said, "sometimes I cannot come up with an appropriate word, but I can explain it in other ways, and others understand, too." Additionally, as a member of the university debate club, she liked exchanging opinions with others and getting to know others' opinions toward the issue.

At the task recall session, the two students' attitude and preference toward classroom activities reflected their attitude toward the class as well. Although Sijoon thought that the discussion activity was the most meaningful compared to the other activities, his reasoning was that, "the opportunity to speak our opinion out was good… but skills to express ourselves in English did not improve, because our group members' English proficiency was similar. I hope our teacher teaches us various expressions…" In terms of other activities, he thought that they could be conducted individually, perceiving no values in doing them as an in-class group work. However, when he was asked whether he would do them as homework, he did not answer. Hani rated both the picture description and the discussion the most meaningful, and her reason behind this was that both activities gave opportunities to speak and share her opinion with her group members. Especially, since she was deeply interested in marriage custom, she said that she enjoyed them very much. When it comes to other activities, she also saw them meaningful, as they provided her with new vocabulary and expressions.

When it comes to the English learning environment outside of the classroom, both Sijoon and Hani were not actively engaged in English learning activities at the moment of this study. Sijoon had no motivation to study English at that time, because he had no immediate need to study English. Instead, he showed only a vague willingness to study English in the future in a communicative way, if needed, than in the cramming methods he had experienced. At the same time, Hani made an effort to use English outside of the classroom, including going to an English-only lounge at the university, talking with her foreign friends on Facebook, and planning to study English abroad for a short period of time. Moreover, she was planning to obtain several English scores, including the TOEIC speaking, in pursuit of her dream job. Although both of them were not actively engaged in an English learning activity at the time of this study, Sijoon stayed as he was and took rest, while Hani sought additional opportunities to practice English and make future plans.

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From an objective point of view, they were placed in the same environment because they were not involved in English learning activity outside of the class. From another point of view, they were constructing their own affordances differently within the same environment.

Unlike Class A, Class B was exclusively for freshmen majoring in mechanical engineering, and all the students were put in the class regardless of the students' desire to choose their class. Because of this fact, 17 out of the 18 students were male. The basic curriculum and communicative teaching method was the same as Class A, as the curriculum was mandated by the university.

As for Dongjoo in Class B, the purpose of taking this class was not different from others. He neither had an alternative course to take nor a sufficient English speaking score. He said, "I had to bite the bullet and to take the course. … but other classes had more than 50 or 60 students in a classroom. Now I think that I'm lucky to take this class." This comment shows that at first he could not help but take the class, but he soon acknowledged the reality and rejoiced for taking the class.

Although the choice was mandated, he liked the instructor and her communicative teaching method, and thus valued class participation. He mentioned that he had no fear of speaking to foreigners thanks to his experience with native English speakers during his school days. He initiated conversations with the instructor whenever he met her in the dormitory. He also liked her communicative teaching method, saying that "one thing I like is that… the teacher encourages us to speak much. Even if she is saying something, she stops speaking and listens to students who want to speak. She smiles in front of us every day, although she is not in a good mood. It seems like, she likes teaching." Furthermore, he was confident of his contribution to the class and was certain to receive a good score on the participation section, as shown in Excerpt 4.

> *Excerpt 4.*
> I: As far as I know, attendance, participation, two speaking tests, one final test and assignments account for the final grade. Which one are you most confident in?
> Dongjoo (D): Well... attendance. And participation. Maybe I will get a perfect score (on those two). Speaking tests… I am slightly above the average. As for the final test, last semester, I got a good score, but I'm not sure this time.

Despite his favorable attitude toward his instructor and active participation, the poor classroom conditions, including the small classroom, unsatisfactory gender ratio, the incompetency of his group members, and the low difficulty level, were all discouraging to him. He showed dissatisfaction regarding the performance of activities with the same male

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students during every class in a windowless classroom. In addition, he evaluated the difficulty level of the class as 1.5 out of 5, equating this university-level class with an elementary school level class he had taken at the college English center which he attended from Grade 3.

Although they shared the same instructor, Joomin's personal evaluation of her was drastically different from that of Dongjoo. While Dongjoo thought that the teacher encourages students to speak and is passionate about teaching, Joomin thought the opposite . Excerpt 5 shows the difference.

Excerpt 5.

I: What do you think of your instructor's personality?

Joomin (J): Hmm… cool?

I: For example? Can you think of any anecdote?

J: (after a long pause) well… sometimes our conversation or discussion pauses or stops. But she just ignores it and moves on.

I: Hmm.. is it cool or neglectful?

J: Neglectful. Certainly, this teacher is less passionate than the other professor (who taught English class last semester). Last semester, the (other) professor encouraged us to speak more, if our conversation stops earlier than expected. She was caring. But this time… this professor just ignores it.

I: … Do you believe her teaching style is appropriate to you?

J: Yes. It's comfortable. It's just she does not have passion. Neither she nor I have (passion). … I just feel like, I'm killing time (there).

I: … What do you like the most about the professor?

J: … Nothing.

Meanwhile, he did not make an explicit effort to learn in class. He mentioned that he was confident of the final written test than any other evaluation criteria, because he had a lot of experience learning English from other teachers he met during his middle and high school years. This suggests that he was not going to take the final test based on what he had learned from the class. When it comes to other evaluation criteria, he was not interested in making an effort and getting higher grades. His attitude toward the assessment and grading criteria represents his rejection of learning English from the class.

Regarding the activities in the class, he showed a generally positive attitude toward the communicative-oriented discussion, but did not value other activities. He preferred discussion activity to all other activities, mentioning that they give opportunities to speak and practice conversation; he called the other activities puerile. He stated that the textbook

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seems to be useless and he regretted having bought it, because the activities in the textbooks were not meaningful to him.

The task recall session showed Dongjoo's orientation of engaging in the activities. His favorite was the picture description, as the oral tests have picture description tasks. At that time, he said that he encouraged his less capable partner to speak out, by teaching him expressions or by speaking first. For the other activities, he saw the relevance of the speaking activities and speaking improvement, but he was worn-out performing them. Interestingly, although Joomin valued discussion over other activities, he detested a particular discussion activity, as the discussion had students play roles of a bride and a broom. He had to play a bride, pretending to be new couple with his partner, who was also a male student. While Dongjoo saw the very same discussion activity as one of the opportunities to practice English, Joomin's perception was dramatically different.

Going beyond the boundary of the class, both participants were not engaged in active English learning during the data collection period of this study. Dongjoo was not attending an ongoing speaking class, which he enrolled in the previous semester with his roommate. He stated that he attended the class with his roommate at 7:00 am last semester, but his roommate and he became tired of waking up early in the morning, ceasing to attend the class. Previously, he took a TOEIC course from a *hakwon* during vacation for a month, in order to obtain a score of more than 780 in order to apply for a special military position; however, he failed and gave up applying. At the time of this study, he was planning to take a TOEFL class in the upcoming vacation, in preparation for an exchange student program to Germany. Joomin did not have a specific plan but to travel a lot, because of the fact that he would be joining the army in the upcoming year. He said that he studied TEPS by himself several times last semester. At that time, he studied for the class subjects, hung out with his friends, but still had plenty of time to study English. However, in the semester of data collection, he said that he did not have time because the workload from his department increased.

2. Their Agency in Constructing Their Affordances

Before getting into the discussion of their agency both inside and outside of the English classroom, it is important to note that the decision to participate in the class was not optional, but was mandated by the university.

As for the participants in Class A, Sijoon's agency in the class was based on doing what was given to him. He neither participated actively nor resisted taking the class; he silently performed the tasks, regardless of his negative opinion toward the speaking activities with his classmates. Sometimes, he stated that he was interested in several attractive themes, such as Thai culture. This agency was also partly attributable to his skepticism about

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studying English and there being no apparent reason to study at the moment of the current research. He said that if necessary, he would be willing to study English in other ways than using cramming methods. For Hani, she explicitly saw the reason as to why she had to participate in the class, as reflected in Excerpt 6. Her purpose of taking this class was, although mandated, to improve her speaking skills in preparation for official English tests and further, to interact with English speakers in the future. In this context, her agency was apparently visible, in that her purpose of doing assignments and performing tasks was to enhance both her writing and speaking skills. She acknowledged that she could not practice these skills outside of the class; thus, she put much effort into the class activities. More specifically, the class was personally meaningful to her.

Excerpt 6.

I : What do you want to gain from this class?

H: Speaking. The format of speaking. Or knack of English speaking. Actually, (activities of) the class resembles the TOEIC Speaking or OPIc exam. So I would like to use what I have learned from this class in preparation for those tests.

I: Oh, then do you believe that your personal learning goal coincides with this class?

H: Definitely. Speaking skill is a must for my future.

I: I believe you take advantage of this class a lot.

H: Yes, I do.

I: … Then, … what are your efforts to achieve your goal?

H: I try to speak much with my partner. And I almost always lead classroom discussion, assisting my English professor.

As for Class B students, this class was regarded as a mandatory requirement. In general, Dongjoo was a highly active student who had joined plenty of varsity activities for various purposes related to his dream. For example, he planned the campus festival as an active member of the university student union, and his goal was to experience how it is like to plan a major activity. Contrary to his agency, in constructing his own life, Dongjoo said that the class was not initiated from his need. From his point of view, this class was not directly related to his future dream of becoming an air mechanic, although several public English tests were. For him, this class was no more than an opportunity to speak with a native speaker for a short period of time. Therefore, his active agency was not fully exercised in the classroom. Joomin's agency was not observable at the time of this study, because he did not know what he would be doing in the future. Joomin acknowledged that Dongjoo had a detailed plan for his dream, but he himself does not have one. He neither

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had a dream, nor a short-term goal related to English. In this regard, fulfilling his graduation requirement was the only motive for Joomin.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings above strongly indicate that the same environment is transformed into and is perceived as various affordances, depending on the individual who perceives it. This study shows that although FL learners' environment is the same, their affordance of the objective environment is largely different based on their goal, interest, personality, and personal FL learning history. To explain the cases illustrated in Class A students, first, Sijoon was not able to construct meaningful English learning affordance, although he was physically placed in an English learning environment. By contrast, Hani's affordance was clearly tangible and vivid. Despite the fact that the English class choice was mandated, she sensitively reacted to the environmental benefits, including English-speaking opportunities and the native English-speaking instructor. These differences in affordance created their different degrees of participation and attitude toward the class, including the instructor, activities, and class formats. While Sijoon remained as a passive learner, Hani actively exercised her agency, investing more efforts to participate in discussions. Their different actions in the classroom result from their different perceptions of their environment. In other words, the same environment and purpose could be interpreted differently to the individual learners, thereby leading to different activities.

Previous studies indicate that L2 learners' goals, personal interest, and previous L2 learning experience are crucial factors for the differential creation of affordances. As Kim's (2010) study has confirmed, L2 learning goals are of direct relation to the construction of affordance. Both Sijoon and Hani shared a learning goal: fulfilling the graduation requirement. Along with this shared goal, Hani voluntarily set up another speaking-related goal, and her environment provided potential opportunities to achieve her additional goal. She sensed these opportunities and thus, could successfully create a meaningful affordance of the classroom with her agency. For Hani, her personal goals, interest, and the classroom were in harmony, which facilitated her creation of affordance. Contrary to Hani, Sijoon's goal was not internalized. He did not see any reason to invest more in the class. Moreover, his negative past experience of learning English affected him to delay setting up new English-related goals. He kept a passive learning attitude and minimally did what was required of him. In this regard, the same mandatory class made Sijoon's agency repressed, whereas Hani perceived the same class as an optimal venue to exercise her agency.

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For Class B students, Dongjoo's affordance of the classroom was the opportunity to speak out and interact with a native speaker of English, along with his practical English need. This conceptualization of the English classroom then led him to participate in the class for speaking purposes, and to seek other private classes in order to prepare for English tests, as he did not see a close link between his exam-related goals and the class. However, Joomin's affordance was not visible. For him, the English classroom was seen as the place for killing time and fulfilling the requirement. From his viewpoint, neither the instructor nor he himself had the passion to lead the class. Therefore, he remained silent in a detached manner.

In the case of Class B, the difference between the two students was due to their instrumental goals, future dreams, and their attitude toward the instructor and the native speakers in general. Dongjoo felt that the classroom was full of speaking opportunities, combined with his instrumental goal. This recognition, with plenty of his positive experiences with native English speakers, facilitated the construction of meaningful affordance. From Dongjoo's perspective, the English classroom, his goals, and attitude toward native English speakers were in harmony, as Sandra's case in Kim's (in press) study. In turn, from Joomin's point of view, passionate teachers were the ones who train students in a hard way, such as in cram schools, and give extra opportunities, as his two memorable English teachers did. In this regard, the seemingly laissez fair instructor seemed too neglectful. He was familiar with the traditional way of learning English than the instructor's democratic, communicative method. Furthermore, he neither set instrumental English goals nor life goals, as he did not know what to do at the moment of data collection. The absence of his goals, combined with his negative perception of the instructor, was a debilitating factor for him to build meaningful affordance.

In terms of affordance and agency, this study contrasts with the previous studies in its scope. From a sociocultural lens, agency is a socially mediated activity to negotiate himself or herself in a community. As the previous studies on agency highlight immigrants or study abroad students in the ESL environment, attention has been paid to agencies in power relation between native speakers and non-native immigrants (McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001) and the negotiation of identity in a sociocultural setting. However, this study has investigated the individuals' lives through a detailed, microscopic perspective. FL learners' personal background, individual characteristics, and instrumental power of official English tests emerged as important factors to understand agency and affordance, rather than the power relation, which is reported in the previous research.

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VI. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The same environment translates into different affordances, and the same task produces different activities (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). As shown from this study, all participants realized the meaning potential of the classroom differently. Based on the realization, their activities of the same task were also different. This fact denotes that the language learning context is more multifarious and more individual than which was previously considered.

This study implies that the English learning environment should be meaningful to the learners, rather than to other stakeholders. Positing English classroom as full of meaning potential, students' own construction of affordance is crucial. Other stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and the society, are supposed to assist the creation of meaningful affordances. What matters is not the object external factors, but the perceived meaning potentials of the environment.

The second implication of this study is that the active exercise of students' own agency should be promoted. At a tertiary level, yielding choices to students, respecting the students' will, or understanding the students' individual values would be attractive ways to enhance the practice. Curriculum developers, policy makers, teachers, administrative officers and all other related personnel should be aware of the fact that students bring different life histories, value systems, goals, interests and other characteristics. Ideally, instead of forcing only one choice for everyone, giving choices and respecting their background would be more beneficial to FL learners, in assisting them to transform their environment into affordances.

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APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

1. The objective environment

(1) In the class

- Who is your instructor?
- What textbook do you use?
- How many students take the class?
- Could you explain the teaching method of your class?
- Are you familiar with your classmates?

(2) Outside of the class

- Are you taking any private classes?
- Are you planning to take any public English tests?
- Do you practice English outside of the class?

2. Affordance

(1) In the class

- Could you describe your instructor's personality?
- Do you think that your instructor's teaching style suits you?
- What do you like and dislike the most about the instructor?
- What is your reason behind taking this class?
- Do you have any reason of choosing this class over other classes?
- What evaluation criteria are you most confident of?
- Do you believe that this class helps you prepare for your future?
- How do rate the level of difficulty of this class?
- Could you evaluate your textbook?
- What kind of activities do you like from the textbook?
- Do you believe that the textbook helps your English proficiency?
- What do you think of the teaching method of your class?
- If you can improve the teaching method, how would you change it?
- Do you believe that the pair/group works you did in the class helps you?

(2) Outside of the class

- What private education did you take after entering the university?

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- If you can take a private English class, what do you want to take?
- If you are planning to take a public English exam, what is your purpose?
- Are you taking classes in English? If you are, what is your reason?

3. Agency

(1) In the class

- What do you want to gain from this class and what efforts are you making?
- What does this class mean to you?
- What is your reason behind performing the assignments and tasks?
- Why didn't you obtain an English score and get exempt from the class?

(2) Outside of the class

- What does English mean to you?
- What is the relationship between your dream and English?
- What is your reason for studying (or not studying) English right now?
- Do you believe that the effort you are making will help you in the future?

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

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Received in January, 2013
Reviewed in February, 2013
Revised version received in March, 2013

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