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Professional Development through Action Research: A Case Study of an EFL Teacher Learner

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This case study explores how conducting action research affected a teacher learner's professional development within the English language curricular reform context in Korea. The subject of this study was a high school teacher participating in a graduate seminar that was taught by the researcher. The participant's action research paper, reflective journals, and group work projects were collected as data, and the subject was also interviewed by the researcher. The Vygotskian notion of concept development was adopted as a theoretical lens to understand the teacher learner's development. The findings indicate the positive influence of action research on her professional development in the area of understanding diverse research methods, externalizing her perceptions about the curricular reforms, applying theory to classroom realities, and attempting to transform her instruction. However, her instructional practices were not fully transformed due to contextual constraints such as an exam-oriented setting. As such, action research revealed the status of her concept development and helped to identify areas in which she needs support for further professional growth in the context of curricular reforms. Appropriately structured and supported action research has the potential to promote teacher learners' concept development by linking scientific knowledge (theoretical knowledge) to their everyday concepts (experiential knowledge), and thus should be included in teacher education programs in the educational reform context. Further implications are provided for L2 teacher education programs and L2 teacher educators as well as for teachers themselves.

[action research/professional development/concept development/reflective teaching]

I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers have pointed out that language teachers need to develop professional

knowledge and expertise through reflection (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Freeman, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Kamhi-Stein & Galván, 1997). A reflective approach to teaching provides teachers with opportunities to observe, assess, and reflect systematically on their instructional practices in order to enhance their understanding and awareness and to make necessary transformations (McDonough, 2006). Numerous studies indicate that teacher reflection increases when they are engaged in action research (Edge, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 2002; Somekh, 1993; Wallace, 1998). By promoting reflection on their classroom instruction, action research enables teachers to bridge the gap between theory and their teaching by identifying and solving immediate problems that emerge in their classrooms (Crookes, 1993) thereby contributing to their professional growth.

For the past decade in the Korean English as a foreign language (EFL) context, there has been a call for effective professional development opportunities that prepare teachers to meet new instructional demands proposed in communicative language teaching (CLT)-oriented curricular reforms. In order to achieve the goal of developing learners' communicative competence, the recent national curricula (i.e., the 7th and the revised 7th National Curricula) mandated task-based instruction, learner-centered instruction, and teaching English in English (Ministry of Education, 1998, 2006). Numerous studies, however, demonstrate that due to various factors relating to teachers, students, and their instructional contexts, Korean English teachers' instructional perceptions and practices remain based in traditional teaching methods such as grammar-translation and audiolingual methods (Seonghee Choi, 2000; Guilloteaux, 2004; Eun-Ju Kim, 2008; Sung-Yeon Kim, 2002; Li, 1998). In order to help teachers better understand the curricular reform concepts and implement them in their classrooms, appropriate professional development opportunities need to be designed. Action research can be one way to create such opportunities in the educational reform settings, as it helps teachers make sense of theories and seek answers to their questions in ways that improve their instructional practices (Nunan, 1992).

Despite previous studies about the effects of incorporating action research into teacher education programs in L2 instructional contexts and more specifically in English teaching contexts (McDonough, 2006; Thorne & Qiang, 1996; Taesun Yang, 2009), little research has been conducted on how action research can be implemented in a degree teacher education program in the curricular reform context. Thus, this study explores the process of how a teacher learner conducted an action research project based on the English class that she taught and examines how this process of conducting research affected her professional development and what that development looked like.

II. ACTION RESEARCH AND L2 TEACHER EDUCATION

Action research was inspired by Dewey's (1929) ideas about progressive education, and the term was first used by Lewin (1946) who viewed it as an alternative to positivistic research (Rainey, 2000). Although initial proponents of action research emphasized its potential to empower and liberate participants through reform cycles of reflection and action, more recent approaches to action research have focused on its contributions to teachers' professional development (McDonough, 2006). Although there have been various definitions of action research, Burns (1999) summarized its typical features as follows (p. 30):

1. Action research is contextual, small-scale and localized—it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers.
4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.

Several studies examining action research with these characteristics showed the positive impact of conducting action research on the professional development of L2 student teachers (Burton, 1997; Cormany, Maynor, & Kalnin, 2005; Moreira, Vieira, & Marques, 1999; Roberts, 1993; Smith, 2005) and graduate students (Crookes & Chandler, 2001; McDonough, 2006; Thorne & Qiang, 1996). For instance, Thorne and Qiang (1996) described the introduction of an action research component into an M.A. program in a Chinese university and found improvement in student teachers' attempts of new activities and techniques, varied use of classroom materials, and sensitivity to classroom dynamics. Similarly, McDonough (2006) examined the impact of learning about conducting action research through a graduate seminar on the professional development of graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who were teaching in foreign and second language departments. She found that the TAs developed expanded perceptions of research, benefited from peer collaboration, and employed new L2 instructional practices.

In the Korean context, Taesun Yang (2009) examined English teacher learners' responses to carrying out action research in a graduate program. She surveyed seven pre-service and ten in-service graduate students enrolled in a graduate course on English classroom management and supervision. The results showed that teacher learners experienced personal and professional development as well as identity change into more active and

critical teachers. However, teachers reported impediments such as time constraints and lack of skills or training in doing action research.

Although these prior studies have shown several teacher learners' responses to action research and its impact on their development, little research has been conducted in the context of curricular reforms. Since the curricular reform context may require teachers to implement new teaching concepts in their classrooms, support for teachers in terms of connecting theoretical concepts and instructional practices may be needed. Action research can help to support these teachers. Therefore, this study explores the impact on a teacher learner's professional development from conducting action research in the recent English language curricular reform context.

III. TEACHER LEARNING AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In early research on teacher education, teacher learning and professional development were viewed from positivist or process-product perspectives. These perspectives define learning as an internal process isolated in the learner's mind and independent of the contexts in which it occurs. This approach considered teachers as transmitters of content knowledge to the students, assuming that if teachers learned abstract, theoretical knowledge outside of the classrooms they would teach in, they would be able to apply this knowledge to classroom teaching regardless of their context (Freeman, 2002). This approach was criticized due to the oversimplified, depersonalized, and decontextualized nature of its underlying assumptions. It has also been pointed out that the complexities of teacher learning, classroom life, and contexts cannot be captured in neat, clinical experimental designs (Johnson, 2009).

On the other hand, more recently, a sociocultural view of learning has defined human learning as a dynamic social activity situated in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts. This perspective suggests that attention should be paid to teachers' complex mental lives and professional experiences in the contexts in which teachers are located including their classrooms, schools, curricula, and larger sociocultural or sociopolitical contexts (Johnson, 2009). In this tradition, teachers are not viewed as passive reicipients of theory but as active users and creators of theory as appropriate for their own instructional contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In general educational research, Kennedy (1999) argued that *expertise* in teaching emerges out of the ways in which teachers make sense of *expert* knowledge that is prepositional and publicly approved as a principled means of understanding phenomena in a specific community, and their own *craft* or *experiential* knowledge based on their own experiences as learners of teaching. Similarly, sociocultural theory views professional development of L2 teachers as "a process of building on

teachers' everyday concepts about language, language learning, and language teaching in order to understand the scientific concepts about language, SLA, learning, and L2 teaching that are produced, accepted, and adapted in the profession" and finally to develop true concepts or the basis of expertise in a particular domain" (Johnson, 2009, p. 15).

In order to examine one teacher learner's development through conducting action research, this study employs the notion of concept development based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Vygotsky (1986) distinguished between everyday and scientific concepts. Everyday concepts are either based on concrete practical experiences (spontaneous) or deliberately taught and consciously learned concepts based on a specific context (nonspontaneous). However, since both spontaneous and nonspontaneous concepts are tied to specific contexts, they are not always complete or coherent (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). On the other hand, scientific or academic concepts are learned through formal education, and since they are based on theoretical investigation, they are presumed to be coherent, systematic, and generalizable to new contexts. Thus, scientific concepts enable learners to function appropriately in a range of situations without the constraints that are typically created by everyday concepts (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007).

Vygotsky (1986) proposed that there is a dynamic and interdependent relationship between everyday concepts and scientific concepts. Through such a dialectic perspective on the two types of concepts, everyday concepts, based on daily experiences, generate the potential for the development of scientific concepts in more formal school contexts, and scientific concepts in turn offer general principles to strengthen everyday concepts. Vygotsky (1986) further maintained that scientific concepts should be presented to students, specifically in ways that connect the concepts to both the everyday knowledge and the practical activities of learners. Robbins (2003) also argued that the extent to which instruction relates everyday concepts to scientific concepts is important to learners' internalization, which, in teacher learning, transforms teacher learners' understandings of their teaching and is manifested in their actual classroom practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2003) and thus is essential to their concept development.

Teachers' professionalization includes making connections between the scientific concepts taught in their L2 teacher education coursework and their everyday concepts about L2 and L2 instruction (Johnson, 2009). Action research has the potential to provide a mediational space for teacher learners' professional growth in that it is intended to solve problems in their everyday classroom practices by making sense of theories they learned from their teacher education programs. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine teacher learners' conceptual development through their action research, as it will reveal their current developmental state as well as suggest further support needed for their future growth.

IV. METHODOLOGY

1. Setting and Participant

The data were collected in 2009 from a graduate seminar in the graduate school of education at a private university located in Seoul, Korea. The seminar was taught by the researcher, and the purpose of this course was for the students to acquire theoretical understanding and practical knowledge about the teaching of listening and speaking in EFL contexts. The course met once a week for three hours each time over the fifteen-week semester. Readings from book chapters and journal articles covered diverse theories related to the instruction and assessment of English listening and speaking skills. Classroom activities for learners at various proficiency levels were also covered in the readings. In addition, the seminar participants presented relevant research articles selected by the instructor.

There were nine participants in this course including four secondary school English teachers and five pre-service teachers. Jisoo, an in-service teacher, was selected as the subject of the present study because she was the only one who conducted action research based on her own English classroom[1]. She actively presented her ideas in classroom discussions, frequently giving examples from her own school and classroom.

As a requirement for the graduate seminar, Jisoo wrote an action research paper based on her own listening class and weekly journals to reflect on her learning from the graduate seminar and her teaching and to consider the applicability of her learning to her own English classrooms. As a leader for the textbook review project that she collaborated on with two other group members, she compared two high school English textbooks—one developed under the 7th National Curriculum and the other under the revised 7th National Curriculum, and presented the findings. She also collaborated on lesson planning and teaching demonstration as a group project.

At the time of the study, Jisoo had been teaching English at a high school in Seoul for the past four years[2]. Although during the school day all her classes were proficiency-based general English classes including those for advanced 11th graders, she also taught an extracurricular class on listening to mixed-level 11th graders. She had begun studying in an

[1] The five other students who conducted research (3 in-service and 2 pre-service teachers) observed other teachers' classrooms and/or surveyed peer teachers. The three remaining seminar participants (pre-service teachers) wrote research proposals or critical literature reviews.

[2] Jisoo stated that she had previously taught the 10th, 11th, and 12th graders. While she had taught all the levels of the 10th graders (advanced, intermediate-advanced, intermediate-beginning, and beginning) the previous year, she was teaching advanced 11th graders (Journal) at the time of the study.

M.A. program the previous year in order to enhance her English language skills and professional knowledge in English language teaching (ELT). She was particularly interested in language testing and course material development, and in the future she hoped to work for a few years at a national institute specializing in national curriculum development and evaluation and then return to classroom teaching.

2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The data included Jisoo's action research paper on her extracurricular listening class for the 11th graders. They also contained her initial proposal for her research project, as well as notes from two individual conferences on her research project between Jisoo and the instructor. Her twelve weekly journal entries were gathered over the semester, and her group work products including the textbook analysis and a lesson plan were also collected. An interview with Jisoo was conducted at the end of the semester to identify her background information including her learning and teaching experiences and her future plans. The interview as well as the presentations of her final paper and the textbook review were audio-taped and translated verbatim. The field notes by the researcher and all classroom materials were also gathered.

The data were analyzed through grounded content analysis (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). As the data were read thoroughly and repeatedly, tentative conceptual categories were identified. Through further data analysis and refinement of these categories, final themes emerged. The themes largely represented the impact on Jisoo's professional development from conducting action research, as noted in the following table:

TABLE 1

Themes in Jisoo's Data

Expanding Understandings about Research Methods
Externalizing Perceptions about the Curricular Reforms
Applying Theory to Classroom Realities - Understanding Theory Relevant to the Instructional Context - Identifying the Gap between Theory and Practice
Attempting to Transform Instruction on Listening - Responding to Student Needs - Negotiating Contextual Constraints

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000), the researcher strove to implement triangulation, rich and thick description, and peer debriefing. In order to triangulate multiple data sources, the impact of action research on

Jisoo's professional development was reviewed primarily through her action research paper and additionally through the other data sources including oral data (i.e., an interview, presentations) and written data (i.e., journals, textbook analysis, field notes). In order to increase the accuracy of the qualitative findings, the researcher gave rich and thick description about the participant's experiences and the related context. Moreover, in order to improve the validity of the coding process, the emerging themes, and the interpretations of the data, a peer debriefer who was trained as a researcher in applied linguistics and L2 education and who understands the context of the current study was selected. The debriefer offered feedback on the researcher's data analysis and asked probing questions about the study, including asking the researcher about her assumptions.

V. FINDINGS

1. Overview of Jisoo's Action Research Project

Jisoo carried out her action research on her extracurricular listening class, which was comprised of eighteen 11th graders at low-intermediate to advanced proficiency levels. Over the semester, there were ten 90-minute weekly meetings for the course. Her data included three audio-recorded class sessions, four of her teaching journal entries[3] (for the first class and the three recorded classes), interviews with seven students (2 advanced, 4 high-intermediate, 1 low-intermediate), a survey for all the students, and classroom materials. The class was a preparation course for the listening comprehension section of the college entrance exam and standardized tests including the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Test of English Proficiency developed by Seoul National University (TEPS). In this class, although her students wanted to practice their listening and test-taking skills, they tended to feel bored. Also, while teaching for exams was a main goal, she wanted her students to experience real-life listening opportunities and activities. Thus, she decided to adopt authentic materials such as audio/video clips (news, speeches, television shows, dialogues), a movie (*A Christmas Carol*), and an audio book (*Harry Potter*). She endeavored to respond to student needs (test preparation) and interests (authentic materials) that she had become aware of through her observation, interviews, and a survey of her students. She also intended to realize the teaching conceptions that she had learned from her coursework (using authentic materials, teaching English in English, teaching listening strategies) in her classroom. She found that writing her private teaching

[3] Jisoo voluntarily wrote her own journal about the listening class that she taught. This is different from the reflective journal required in the graduate seminar.

journal helped her reflect on her listening instruction and gave her insight into how to modify her original lesson plans to suit her students' needs, interests, and proficiency levels. She concluded that her study will be helpful to teachers who prepare and plan for English listening comprehension lessons in secondary school classrooms.

2. Expanding Understandings about Research Methods

Jisoo seemed to start the graduate seminar with a fairly narrow perception of research but had gained a broader view by the conclusion of the semester when she completed her research paper. In her previous classes, she had mostly learned about quantitative research and had been developing her M.A. thesis on language assessment using this research method (Interview). However, through the seminar, she had opportunities to read various research papers which used qualitative methods and to participate in discussions about conducting and interpreting qualitative research.

Jisoo's broader perspective about research was evident in the design of her action research project in which she adopted qualitative research methods mixed with quantitative analysis of the frequency of the survey results. Although for the course's final project the instructor gave her permission to develop a quantitative research project related to her M.A. thesis, Jisoo instead decided to conduct action research on her own English instruction. Her expanded view of research was also demonstrated by her inclusion of qualitative research papers in her literature review (e.g., Verity, 2000). Moreover, in her class journal (Weeks 10-11), she stated that she found that several qualitative research papers included in class readings helped her reflect on realities in her English classroom (e.g., Carless, 2004; Li, 1998; Liu, Ahn, Baek & Han, 2004).

3. Externalizing Perceptions about Curricular Reforms

Jisoo revealed her understandings about the curricular reforms in her research paper including the concepts of communicative competence as a goal of English teaching, learner-centered instruction, teaching English in English, and task-based language learning. For instance, in her description of the sociocultural background of her study, she stated the goal of the curricular reforms as developing learners' communicative competence, as noted below:

Excerpt 1. Action Research Paper: Introduction[4]

[4] The action research paper and Jisoo's reflective journals were written in Korean, and for this paper, the excerpts were translated verbatim into English. In all the excerpts, statements are in boldface to focus the readers' attention. Content in brackets adds information or indicates intended meanings

> In order to **develop [English learners'] communicative competence, which is the objective of English language education**, the importance of English listening and speaking skills in which learners' proficiency levels are somewhat lower than those of reading and grammar has recently been emphasized in this society… In order to **enhance actual communicative competence**, [English] teachers' additional efforts should be made.

Here, Jisoo acknowledged the social demands for promoting students' communication skills and suggested that English teachers endeavor to respond to these demands. Her awareness of the curricular reforms also appeared in her journal (Week 1), where she wrote that "communicative competence is emphasized [in L2 education], and the objective of L2 learning is to acquire language ability for actual communication."

Jisoo was aware of learner-centered instruction (LCI), and in her action research paper she emphasized the importance of considering student needs and interests that she recognized through careful observation of their responses to her class and through examination of the survey and interviews. She was also interested in enhancing student participation and motivation in her class. Her decision to use authentic materials was based on these considerations about her students. In addition, in her paper, she noted the necessity of using English for instruction and analyzed to what extent and in what contexts she used more or less English for instruction. Although task-based language teaching (TBLT) was least explicitly externalized, she carried out listening activities such as dictations using authentic materials including an English movie. Furthermore, her journals provide support for her acknowledgement about LCI (Weeks 1, 4), using English as the medium of instruction (Weeks 3, 10), TBLT (Weeks 3, 4, 11, 13), and communicative approaches (Week 10).

Jisoo's awareness of the curricular reforms was also evident in her explanation of newly developed textbooks, as seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2. Action Research Paper: Introduction

> The representative example [of recent changes in the public educational system to enhance English learners' communication skills] is the **newly revised English textbooks**. In the listening section, they attempt to provide authentic materials such as debates and sitcoms appropriate to the content of each lesson. Compared with the previous version of the textbook, which seemed to aim at improving students' understanding of functional expressions (e.g., asking for directions, asking for unknown

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which are clear from the context but are not explained in the excerpt. They are at times located next to the literal translations of actual utterances.

information), **the new version focuses on presenting contents similar to real-life listening tasks** by providing key words for a topic relevant to each lesson and fairly long passages based on a topic-based approach.

Jisoo formed her positive evaluation of the new textbook as she did the textbook analysis that she presented as the representative of her group (Week 14). As shown below, she found the new book's advantages to be offering listening materials in more authentic contexts by supplying multimedia materials and many instructional activities designed for varied student levels[5]:

Excerpt 3. Textbook Analysis[6]

The most distinctive difference is the new textbook has a workbook so that students can do auxiliary activities for better understanding. Moreover the **activities in the workbook can be provided with the different level[s] of students** [there are different activities for different levels of students]**.** … Also, the new textbook has **[much] more visually vivid helps** … Instead of tapes, [a] CD is provided with [containing] the **video clips** which show actual dialogues situation [dialogue situations]. So, the efforts to **provide listening [practice] in more authentic situation[s]** are noticeable.

4. Applying Theory to Classroom Realities

1) Understanding Theory Relevant to the Instructional Context

Through her action research paper, Jisoo externalized her understandings about theory and research related to listening instruction. In the literature review section, she introduced research papers on listening materials, which discussed advantages of using multimedia (Joiner, 1997) and authentic materials (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990) in L2 learning and teaching. She also presented L2 listening strategies in terms of definitions, categories, and necessity of their inclusion in L2 listening instruction. She added Bok-shik Kim's (1999) suggestion that teachers should use monitor strategies (having students monitor their learning, plan their future self-study, and evaluate classroom materials and their teacher's instruction) as part of their listening instruction. Finally, she explained advantages of

[5] Later in this book review, Jisoo presented some drawbacks of the new textbook: the level of difficulty is too high and there is too much content to cover.

[6] The textbook review was written in English. Jisoo appeared to compare the textbook materials available to her at the time of the study. One reviewer pointed out that like the newly developed textbooks, those published under the 7th National Curriculum included CDs with videoclips of conversations.

teachers' journal writing, citing Verity (2000) who had described a native speaking teacher's professional development through journal writing in the face of a new EFL teaching environment:

> Excerpt 4. Action Research Paper: Literature Review
> Teacher journal writing was employed in this research in order to **analyze the classroom teaching and to describe what I feel according to student response**… Verity (2000) explained characteristics of teacher writings known as narratives, self-directed writing, private writing, and diaries and their effectiveness [on teacher learning]. In this [teaching journal] writing, we can see **the process of classes and the teacher's mental process and cognitive flow according to student response**. Most of all, Verity stated that **journal writing enabled teachers to analyze their own classes and to make necessary changes**.

In this excerpt, Jisoo discusses how she decided to write her own private teaching journal because she saw the potential of journal writing as described by Verity (2000): It enabled her to reflect on her own instruction and externalize her feelings and the need for instructional transformation.

2) Identifying the Gap between Theory and Practice

Conducting action research provided Jisoo with opportunities to describe typical English listening instruction in Korea and to compare it to the kind of instruction recommended by the reforms and theories in ELT.

> Excerpt 5. Action Research Paper: Abstract
> Still up to now, listening has been viewed as a passive process of learners rather than as an active process.… However, [more recently] **listening has been reinterpreted as complex cognitive process**, not just a basic language skill nor a simple, passive process. Nonetheless, due to the [instructional] goal of [obtaining higher scores on] the **college entrance exam** in our country [South Korea], only a few class hours have been allotted for listening activities. In particular, despite **major content changes in the new textbooks**, as students advance to the upper level at a high school, **the focus is on simple repetitive training for listening comprehension tests following the format of the college entrance exam.**

In this excerpt, Jisoo discussed discrepancies she had found between her theoretical learning about the listening process and the instructional practices in typical English

classrooms at her high school focusing on test preparation. Similarly, in her journal entry below, although she frequently reflected on the effectiveness of task-based language learning, she stated that the frequency of tasks needs to be modified appropriately according to the classroom context:

> Excerpt 6. Journal: Week 11
> Ideally, **it would be great if students could learn through the process of doing tasks.** But continuous tasks may be another burden to the students. In particular, this study [Carless, 2004] focused on elementary school students [in Hong Kong], but **I am somewhat suspicious about to what extent tasks can be used with Korean middle or high school students** who have a high learning load [have a large amount of content that needs to be covered in English class]. If the number of tasks is small, learning may be somewhat limited. But **if tasks are continuously presented in the current school context, it would be hard to finish the assigned content within the limited period of time.**

Here, Jisoo was concerned that since it was expected that the textbooks be covered within the limited time period at her high school, carrying out many tasks would not be very effective for her students. The two excerpts above show the conflicts that she felt between theories in ELT and the realities of her English classroom.

5. Attempting to Transform Instruction on Listening

Based on her knowledge about theories on ELT and listening instruction, Jisoo wanted to modify her instruction on listening to suit her students' needs and her own teaching conceptualizations, as discussed below:

> Excerpt 7. Action Research Paper: Abstract
> Still up to now, listening has been viewed as a passive process of learners rather than as an active process. Specifically in the case of high school English classrooms, **classes have focused on practicing listening comprehension questions to be tested on the college entrance exam**. **This study was conducted in order to get away from those kinds of listening classes.** … **It examines what English listening classrooms look like**, whether there was consistency between my course plan and my students' responses, and what discrepancies, if any, occurred between the two. Moreover, this study traces **what changes have been made** [in my class] due to such gaps so that it could contribute to the preparation and planning of English listening classes.

1) Responding to Student Needs

When Jisoo planned her original listening class and later felt the need to modify it, student needs and responses to her class were the most important factor. She thought that listening materials/instruction should be interesting, appropriate to students' levels, and connected to exam preparation and lesson contents. These factors helped her decide when and to what extent authentic materials and test preparation materials should be used. In the following, she discusses how she quickly moved to a news segment about a current event when she noticed that her students were bored with repeated listening test practice:

> Excerpt 8. Action Research Paper: Teacher Journal about the Third Class (Oct. 23)
> In the first and the second class sessions, first, I provided my students with well-organized listening comprehension strategies, key words, and expressions according to test types. Then we practiced a sample listening test [for the college entrance exam]. During the test, they seemed to use strategies and key words well. But when they worked on today's test sample, **they looked bored with and tired of repetitive practice of the listening test**. So after briefly checking the answers to the sample test, **we moved on to the Easy News segment and listened to a news clip about Influenza A which is a hot issue these days**. **I asked them to take the fullest advantage of their background knowledge, and they looked more interested than they were when listening to the sample test.** Finally, **we studied the first type of the TEPS together**. Since this was the easiest question type and overlapped some textbook dialogues and expressions, **the students were able to find the answers confidently. But they did not seem very interested and focused**. A class like this in which the teacher provides the students with various types of listening activities [using different materials] and has them work on listening during the entire 90-minute class session would be **too burdensome for the students.**

Jisoo thought that her change of materials (Easy News) and teaching methods based on students' response was successful. She increased her students' interest by choosing a news topic that was familiar to the students and encouraging them to use their background knowledge about the current subject. Then she moved onto the first (and the easiest) TEPS question format. She found that test preparation for this type of question stimulated her students' confidence but did not heighten their interest and focus. Lastly, she stated that she felt that classes that solely focus on practicing listening would be very demanding for the students and would need to be changed.

Despite such awareness, in the next class, Jisoo wanted to finish the TEPS types to meet the class goal. After this class, however, Jisoo strongly felt the need to change her course

plan. The students' low level of participation and lack of response to the typical format of test preparation (e.g., listening to the text, working on each question in the materials, and then checking answers to questions) caused her to feel the need to transform her instruction, as noted below:

> Excerpt 9. Action Research Paper: Teacher Journal Entry about the Fourth Class Session (Oct. 30)
>
> **This class was the hardest and the most boring class with the least participation in this semester.** When diverse listening materials were provided in the previous lessons, the students looked very tired. Thus, today, after I finished up a test sample as quickly as I could, I moved to the second to fourth TEPS question types. At the beginning of the class, the advanced students looked motivated as they worked on the TEPS questions. However, when the difficulty level of test passages increased, **even the advanced students could not focus very well. The students looked very tired and were not responsive, and I continued to have them work on questions and check answers.** When the students first worked on test questions, they participated well. But it seemed that **the students got tired of repeated test question patterns and working on test questions for 90 minutes continuously. I felt there should be some changes in my lesson plan.**

When Jisoo observed the advanced students were not focusing on working on the test questions, she decided to change her plan. Thus, in the next lesson (the fifth one), she changed her plan from conducting practice of the listening question types of another standardized test to using authentic material relating to a movie to be released shortly:

> Excerpt 10. Action Research Paper: Teacher Journal Entry about the Fifth Class Session (Nov. 6)
>
> [In today's class,] **the students showed the best participation, level of interest, and response. Originally, I planned to cover listening question types of the TOEFL** as I did for those of the TEPS. However, **since I saw that the students were tired of continuous practice of tests, I showed a movie trailer for the animated movie *A Christmas Carol* and videoclips of interviews with the main characters and the director, which we used to work on dictations and translations [I asked students to fill in the blanks in the transcript, while I led them in doing the translations]. The authentic material in the format of videoclips motivated the students**. Most of all, **what I felt most satisfied about** is that the students, who had been tired of working on listening test questions, were able to enjoy watching and listening to the video clips without feeling pressure. However, some students were too immersed in the movies

themselves and **forgot to do dictations and ignored the aspect of learning from this movie.**

Jisoo felt satisfied with using the videoclips, as she was able to motivate the students and they were engaged in working on the material. However, the activities using the authentic material were somewhat traditional—dictations and translations. Nonetheless, she explained in the excerpt from her paper below that her change in materials and teaching methods was due to students' response and lack of participation:

Excerpt 11. Action Research Paper: Results

As shown in my class journal entries above, **with sensitivity to student response and participation, I changed my original lesson plans and materials**. **My focus was on my students' engagement and motivation**, leading me to find ways to make 90-minute listening classes more diverse by providing various kinds of materials. However, having seen my students experience difficulty practicing listening tests and/or focusing on listening for the entire 90 minutes, I changed the quantity of the listening materials and the time given to cover the materials. Moreover, for the class on November 6, **I chose [authentic] material t**o maximize student participation.

Overall, in order to meet her students' needs, Jisoo showed how she changed her teaching materials and methods from her original plans. She additionally argued that even before the first class meeting, teachers should examine students' needs and then prepare materials that are appropriate to meet them.

2) Negotiating Contextual Constraints

Jisoo's action research shows how she negotiated various conflicts including contextual constraints. First, in her regular classes, the large class sizes and the goal of covering textbooks for exams were mandated by the school, and she considered these institutional constraints beyond her control. Thus, she chose to analyze and change her extracurricular listening class where she was able to choose her own materials and teaching methods.

As a teacher, Jisoo frequently experienced conflicts between teaching for exams and teaching for real listening and enjoyment. These conflicts were also related to using classroom materials—test preparation books versus authentic materials. Students' responses added to these conflicts as noted below:

Excerpt 12. Action Research Paper: Implications

The findings indicated that **authentic materials do not always bring positive effects**

> and that the level of students' immersion and interest in class is not always consistent with the improvement of their learning and with their use of listening strategies. Working on test-format questions may have lowered their immersion and interest in the material, but their sense of achievement, feeling that they learned something useful [for test preparation], and their need to learn it [for the exam] were high. On the other hand, **in the case of the class session that used the authentic material, the movie, although students' immersion and interest in the class were the highest [in the survey], their satisfaction with actual learning was marked low**… **Since developing materials which can satisfy students' interest and learning at the same time would be ideal, finding ways to connect authentic materials and the test format and to have students feel that they have learned something** [from using authentic materials] will be helpful to the teachers.

This excerpt showed that although the students were engaged in the activity with authentic materials and had high interest in using them, they showed low satisfaction in terms of sense of achievement. Interestingly, the students showed opposite responses to the test preparation materials. In addition, different responses were observed according to their proficiency levels. Later in the paper, Jisoo pointed out that advanced and intermediate students made contradictory evaluations of classes using test preparation materials and authentic materials. Advanced students preferred challenging test preparation that was directly connected with their learning for the test rather than the movie, which was seen as interesting but not as helpful to their improvement on listening tests. On the other hand, intermediate students preferred the activity using the movie which they thought was both interesting and beneficial to their learning. They felt that the TEPS lessons were too difficult and not useful to them. At the conclusion of the excerpt above, Jisoo argued that ways to meet both students' interest and their sense of learning should be devised, making the suggestion that test items could be developed based on authentic materials.

The last contradiction was about the language of teacher talk. According to Jisoo's action research paper, although she wanted to use English when she taught, it was also important to her that her students understand her instruction. Thus, she observed that whereas she used English more frequently with authentic materials (specifically for questions), she used Korean for instruction on test preparation to explain listening strategies and the meanings of listening texts and questions.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that conducting an action research project as a part of a graduate

seminar had a positive influence on the teacher learner's professional development. It provided opportunities for her to expand her perceptions about research methods, to externalize her views about the curricular reforms, to connect theories and research studies with her classroom realities, and to attempt to transform her teaching in her English listening class at the high school. This positive impact of action research supports the previous studies conducted in graduate programs in second/foreign language instruction (McDonough, 2006) and in EFL contexts (Thorne & Qiang, 1996; Taesun Yang, 2009). In particular, the current study revealed that conducting action research demonstrated what the teacher learner's concept development looks like, how her instructional context influenced her development, and what teacher educators and her teacher education program need to do to support for her further development.

Mediated by reflections made as she carried out her action research, Jisoo was mostly able to achieve her goals of promoting student engagement and interest in listening classes by adopting authentic materials as well as by covering test preparation and combining these types of activities based on her students' responses. Her sensitivity to her students influenced her instruction, and she made efforts to differentiate her class from other regular high school English classes.

Action research potentially served as a mediational space where two types of concepts were connected: scientific concepts of L2 learning and teaching that she learned from her coursework and everyday concepts from her classroom teaching that were constructed through her English learning and teaching experiences. Carrying out action research externalized her everyday concepts and connected these with scientific concepts in her attempt to transform her class based on her conceptualization of teaching listening. While she knew that her students wanted to work directly on test preparation using test materials, she included various authentic materials to improve students' skills for listening in real-world situations.

On the other hand, in terms of the curricular reform concepts that Jisoo had learned about in her coursework, her action research showed that her concept development was not fully achieved. Several aspects of her teaching practices were similar to traditional teaching methods: She spent most of her time covering the test preparation books and having the students translate listening texts and questions and practice finding accurate answers. She used traditional exercises such as dictations while using authentic materials, a practice which was somewhat incompatible with TBLT. Her use of English for communication was limited to when she asked questions about the listening texts. As a result, she viewed the students as knowledge recipients rather than as active participants in their learning process as mandated by the curricular reforms (i.e., learner-centeredness).

The contextual constraints such as exam-oriented classroom instruction are related to why her instructional practices were not fully transformed. Although Jisoo was aware of

the objectives of the curricular reforms as the development of communicative competence, her more immediate goal, which was consistent with that of her students, was to increase students' ability to find correct answers on listening exams. Since she was sensitive to her students' needs and responses, she was not free from teaching for the exams. Although she had more freedom for her teaching materials in this extracurricular listening class, she was not able to completely avoid the constraints of the class.

Thus, the findings indicated that the macro-structure surrounding Jisoo's English listening classroom needs to be considered as an important factor impacting her professional development. Even though she had theoretical knowledge about the curricular reforms, the exam-oriented institutional mandates could not support her realization of idealized teaching conceptions. Also, her students' need to prepare for exams justified her exam-based teaching. Therefore, the ultimate goal of developing communicative competence may serve as a long-term objective, but Jisoo regarded it as peripheral in the face of the more immediate goal of ELT for exams. The contextual constraints related to exam-oriented classes, expectations from the school and students, and pressure on teachers to cover materials directly related to the exams played a critical role in deciding what should be taught in the high school English classrooms. Without these macro-structure issues embedded in her instructional setting being addressed, it would not be possible to expect her to implement the curricular reforms successfully.

The findings imply that teacher educators should be aware of the crucial role that conducting action research can play in teacher learners' professional development. Thus, support should be given from teacher education programs in terms of creating action research courses to give fuller guidelines about research methods and maintaining support for teacher learners as action researchers. Since action research on teacher learners' own classrooms can reveal their understanding of teaching concepts and their classroom practices, teacher educators would be able to consider which areas the teacher learners need to develop in as well as what teacher educators need to do in support of them. Therefore, teacher learners' action research projects help teacher educators reflect on their individual courses as well as on their teacher education programs.

It is also implied that teacher learners' concept development needs to be supported to develop a more refined understanding of the curricular reform concepts and the implementation of them in classroom contexts. They should be provided with scientific concepts related to the curricular reforms in both theoretical and practical ways. Based on Vygotsky's notion of concept development, Karpov's (2003) proposal for learning a concept may be useful: Concepts should be overtly taught along with related procedures. Thus, teacher learners need to be provided with explicit instruction about the concepts and how to enact them for the successful implementation of any curricular reforms. In particular, models in which these curricular reform concepts are actually implemented in

real exam-oriented high school classrooms should be presented to the teacher learners. Moreover, support should be made in the process of creating strategies to overcome these contextual constraints (e.g., teaching/learning for exams) so that teacher learners will be able to develop a new sense of professional expertise. Teacher education programs and teacher learners' instructional sites must become venues where such theoretical and procedural knowledge are presented, manipulated, and enacted in actual classroom teaching.

VII. CONCLUSION

The current study provides insights for teacher education programs in terms of the role of conducting action research in promoting teacher learners' concept development and in revealing areas that need more support from teacher educators and programs. However, there are several limitations of this study that should be investigated in future research to continue to develop ways to promote teachers' professional development. First, the findings of this study, which examined one teacher learner, may not be generalizable. Thus, more teacher learners in the same seminar and in other teacher program contexts need to be investigated. In this way, insight can be gained into teaching various skill areas in various teaching contexts. Next, this study only examined the teacher learner's development during one semester of the teacher education program. A follow-up study is needed to investigate changes in her teaching conceptions and practices in the future semesters. This type of study could demonstrate the long-term effects of carrying out action research. Follow-up research could also address how she intends to do action research to promote her further professional development. Third, although this study gave evidence for the impact of individual action research, collaborative action research can also be examined as an important professional development tool. In collaborative research, more than two teacher researchers conduct research or individuals conduct research on other teachers' classrooms. Lastly, as this study suggested using action research as a re-starting point for further teacher development, it would be meaningful to examine subsequent support from teacher educators and teacher education programs and how this influences teacher learners' professional development.

With its demonstration of the need for support from teacher education programs in relation to instructional concepts and practices, action research in the current study showed its potential to provide teacher learners with opportunities not only to reflect on their learning from coursework and classroom teaching but also to help true concepts for L2 teaching emerge by making connections between scientific concepts and their everyday concepts and by helping transform their instructional perceptions and practices. Thus,

appropriate action research should be included in teacher education programs in the CLT-based curricular reform context in Korea that has demonstrated a pressing need for effective professional development opportunities for English teachers to become competent practitioners. Finally, this study provides insights into the dialectics and dynamics between educational policies and implementation, between teacher education programs and the curricular reform context, and between theory and practice and casts new light on the role of action research as a mechanism for teacher learning within the context of curricular reforms.

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Examples in: English
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Applicable Levels: Secondary/Higher

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