

# *Living Well in a Changing World: What Korean Teachers of English say About a Study Abroad Program in Canada*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the experiences of Korean teachers of English-as-a Second Language participating in a one-month study abroad program situated in Alberta, Canada. Issues of language learning, pedagogical content knowledge, and cross-cultural awareness are discussed, as well as the applicability of such new knowledge in the Korean ESL context, as perceived by participants.

**RESUME:** Ce papier passe en revue les expériences d'enseignants coréens d'anglais langue étrangère qui ont participé dans un programme d'un mois d'étude à l'étranger. Ce programme a eu lieu en Alberta, au Canada. Apprendre la langue, la connaissance du contenu pédagogique et la prise de conscience du milieu interculturel y sont des questions soulevées. On y soulève aussi la possibilité de mettre en place de telles nouvelles connaissances dans le domaine de l'anglais langue étrangère en Corée comme le perçoivent les participants.

That the world is changing every moment is indisputable. Accordingly, people must themselves be changing; more importantly, with the current rate of change in all dimensions of life, people need to develop the ability to change – to develop new ways of thinking and viewing the world. Across generations, education has played a significant role in transforming people's minds and helping them live well in a changing world. But never has the speed of change been comparable to that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In response to world changes, education's role is to continually reassess how to enable people to use the assets inherent within their history and experience, and apply newly learned perspectives to read the ever-changing world.

A significant tool for reading the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the acquisition of second languages. Through the learning of a new

language, people simultaneously learn to read a new world, become more sensitive to the changing world, and acquire experiences to help them more fully contribute to the world community. Such are reasons cited for learning languages in curricular statements around the world (e.g., [doe.state.in.us/standards/docs-Language/2007-06-06-WorldLang-Rationale.doc](http://doe.state.in.us/standards/docs-Language/2007-06-06-WorldLang-Rationale.doc); Ministry of Education 1999. The 7th Curriculum. Seoul. Korea; [www.educacao.sp.gov.br/](http://www.educacao.sp.gov.br/); [www.education.gov.ab.ca/k\\_12/curriculum/bysubject/languages/spaLA789.pdf](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bysubject/languages/spaLA789.pdf)).

Contemporary language learning requires contemporary approaches to language instruction. A language teacher's beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of the target language and culture shape how they teach which, in turn, influences the beliefs their learners encounter about the world. But most second language teachers never have the opportunity to *live* the second language and culture that they teach.<sup>1</sup> However, among those who do, most are likely to experience the second language and culture through short term study abroad programs.

Although research about study abroad programs for language teachers is scant, what exists confirms that they are recognized as a beneficial opportunity for teacher professional development in areas such as language learning, pedagogical content knowledge, and cross-cultural awareness (Bilash, 2006; Harbon, 2005; Teichler, 2005; Willard-Holt, 2001). This paper explores the perturbations (Maturana & Varela, 1987) brought about in the experience of teachers in a study abroad program, in particular the challenges, struggles, or tensions experienced between participants from different cultural backgrounds, in the process of understanding one another and their cumulative impact on their taken-for-granted way of thinking about both their home and new cultures.

To teach means to lead learners to a new perspective of the world, and perturbing them to evolve from their taken-for-granted viewpoints to new understandings of the world. This process of perturbation usually involves an encounter of different thoughts, cultures, worlds, and conflicts between different perspectives in learning, as well as resistance to accepting the new and changing the already established. These conflicts lead to what Maturana and Varela (1987) have called disequilibrium and require emotional discomfort to regain equilibrium. The process does not necessarily mean an ultimate rejection of new ideas; rather the temporary emotional discomfort is a part of the learning, of the passage to a deeper and reciprocal understanding.

Needless to say, this understanding is the result of time consuming negotiation and is very significant in a changing world where multi-cultural and -racial identities must exist in harmony.

Given that study abroad programs bring individuals in direct encounters with two different cultures, study abroad programs are perturbations. They provide opportunities for increased awareness, horizon-broadening (Teichler, 2004), and personal re-calibration. How teachers respond to perturbations and regain equilibrium forms a part of their personal and professional identities and impacts their students' second language learning and beliefs. As such, any assessment of a study abroad program should examine its perturbation potential as well as the supports it offers for regaining equilibrium.

### *Contexts*

Aiming to internationalize its relationships in the 1970s, the Alberta government began to develop sister relationships in other parts of the world. The first such relationship was developed with Kangwon province (Korea) in 1974. Soon thereafter, the University of Alberta and Kangwon Province began the Kangwon Teacher Education Program (KTEP), a professional development program for middle school and high school teachers of English in Kangwon province. Korean teachers are funded by their provincial government, and Alberta has provided a small stipend for cultural activities; the program has been operating for over 23 years, having educated over 600 English teachers in Kangwon. Although reports on this program in the form of participating teachers' reflections can be found (in Korean) on the web site of the Kangwon Education Office, there has been no research about its results as a study abroad program for English teachers. The program's contributions to the development of Korean teachers of English, English education in Korea, and understanding the changing world have not been assessed in any systematic way. This research focuses on what role KTEP plays in helping teachers see challenges in the changing world, inventing fresh understandings of the cultures of Korea and Canada, and developing their leadership and professionalism.

### *The Kangwon Teacher Education Program (KTEP)*

KTEP was designed as a four week study abroad professional development immersion program for Kangwon province middle school and high school teachers of English, to help them improve language,

culture, and pedagogy. Over the years, it has transformed in response to changing times, economies, and directors. Through both in and out of class professional development activities, participants learn theoretical concepts and principles, and apply them in daily and evening classroom activities with facilitators. They also experience and share reflections on a home stay weekend with local families, professional exchanges with teachers from Canada, Japan, and China, numerous field trips to historical sites across the province, and contacts with the Korean community in Edmonton.

### *Research Design*

This research study had two phases of data collection: a pre-program survey about expectations and perceptions was completed in the first week of the KTEP program, followed by interviews conducted in the final days of the program. The pre-program survey revealed that most participants had never been out of Korea (21 of 26) and that they expected to improve their English, get to know Canadians, and learn more about teaching English. Responses were highly similar and consistent, suggesting either that participants had been told what to expect or that they had never had occasion to reflect on this matter before. End of program interviews were conducted with each participating teacher, to determine what they felt they had learned and how they perceived their pedagogical thinking to have changed. The 11 male and 15 female teachers had six to 28 years of experience and ranged in age from 31 to 52. Interviews were conducted in English and/or Korean, according to the comfort level of the KTEP participant. All interviews were recorded, summarized, and analyzed for themes. Due to the tight timelines of the program, no member check was conducted.

### *Themes*

KTEP teachers reported that they had improved their understanding and skills in many areas, such as English language development, cultural awareness, pedagogy, and professional leadership. Their comments suggested that the goals of the program had been met. However, their rich and descriptive anecdotes revealed more. Of particular interest here are the comments they made suggesting that they had learned to see the world in a different way; they had been perturbed but also reached a new equilibrium. Through diverse

experiences with people who were multilingual but had to communicate in one common language – English – they began to see new ways of *being* and *acting* both in and out of the classroom. Five themes emerged, and will be discussed here: (a) reflections on the current contexts calling for change, (b) English as a key to communication and exchanging thoughts between people in the world, (c) reframing the teacher as a professional, (d) synergistic effects of understanding difference, and (e) cultural difference as resistance to change.

### *Reflection on the Current Contexts Calling for Change*

In the interviews, all of the teachers explained what they had learned about their teaching experience in Korea during their stay in Canada. They reported thinking of ways of improving their teaching to help students engage actively in their learning.

*I want to plan my teaching based on students' multiple intelligence. It will be very helpful for them to be engaged in their learning. (Code 15)*

*I like to use activities that require students' body language and gestures because they may enhance students' learning. (Code 17)*

*I want to give an example by myself before I have my students do a project. That will help them to understand what they have to[do]. (Code 22)*

Such statements seemed to also act as critical commentaries about the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum of Korea (1997) which emphasized the learners' perspective in second language learning as well as in other subjects. As a result, KTEP participant-teachers were able to connect and critique what they had experienced in the study abroad program with the policies of learner-centered English teaching that they were becoming more familiar with.

*I felt that language teaching and learning should not lean on only one direction and BSLIM carved that in my mind. English teaching in Korea focusing on finding a correct answer to a question in an exam is not right in this perspective. (Code 13)*

*The textbook students learn from is too difficult and has lots of grammar parts. Moreover, they have to take an exam focusing on vocabulary, grammar and reading. It is most annoying that they are given crippled education. (Code 15)*

*I have to teach English as a strategy for getting a good grade on the entrance exam. I feel conflict when I come to think this is not a desirable direction for English education. (Code 18)*

Their comments show that they feel and know that there is a gap between what they do in practice and the *what* and *why* of newly proposed approaches. They reflected on how to apply new theory and knowledge provided by KTEP to classroom practice and the changes it meant for them.

*When I teach in a multi-level class, I can create and give different tasks for each student's group according to different ability levels. (Code 6)*

Their reflections also expressed intentions to create new ways to do things in their classrooms – not by using current teaching practices, but by inventing their own.

*In Korea we usually do one-way teaching while students are sitting in and listening to what teachers say. However it is impossible to apply team teaching style to the classroom. So I want to select and put higher level students instead of assistant teachers to lead a discussion group. (Code 1)*

*I think I can use games/activities that I did during the program for all of the students and I can change them to fit into school contexts. (Code 11)*

KTEP teachers also noted that their educational system is content heavy, and does not allow teachers and students to have the time to learn in a deep way. Since the given curriculum and textbooks must be completed by the end of the year and taught to every student in preparation for final examinations, many teachers see no alternatives to the teacher-centred approach. As one teacher put it, *I cannot apply what I learned here to my regular class which focused on how to get a good grade on the entrance exam (Code 9)*. Although teachers may not be able to put all the things they learned in the Canadian context into the classroom, the exposure to alternative ideas and practices itself challenges them to see things anew and then to be selective about what might be applicable to their own Korean context.

*Teachers need to change but they are the most conservative and selfish group which does not like change. Teaching facilities or materials may be the same as those in Korea 20 years ago but we need to learn educational enthusiasm and patience to students, like Canadian teachers. (Code 24)*

*English as a Key to Communication and  
Exchanging Thoughts Between People in the World*

Not unlike many second/foreign language teachers in the world, KTEP participants repeatedly described a lack of confidence in their ability to use the target language (English). Most also noted that the KTEP experience helped them to improve their language competency. Furthermore, many teachers described how the KTEP experience gave them an empathy for their students as well as a feeling of responsibility to help them learn English.

*As an English teacher, I am not confident in my English use, so I used English shown in a textbook. As for Dr. B, she explains things in an easy way to help teachers understand but we do not try to get students[to understand] and put the blame on them. And there are so many students in different level of English in one classroom that we can not teach them by their level. That seems related to our incompetent English proficiency. (Code 16)*

Even though some KTEP teachers were sufficiently fluent to avoid problems in communicating in English, they did not feel such proficiency and competency because they had no way to confirm that their English use was appropriate, acceptable, and communicable with English speaking people. This need for an external measure to verify their performance was strong and reflected the important roles of and responsibilities given to examinations and teachers in Korean society.

Confidence using English was a common theme in the interviews. Throughout the KTEP program, many teachers reported increased confidence in using English and a shift in attitude toward teaching English through English. Constant contact with facilitators and the instructor, as well as the daily communicative tasks that took them into the community, made them use English in unfamiliar contexts and overcome their fear of making mistakes or speaking too slowly.

*Before I participate in this program, I was very afraid of talking with native English speaking people and English use. But through the practical experience in KTEP I got confidence in English use and became comfortable with others' eyes when I speak in English. (Code 16)*

Furthermore, exchanging ideas with teachers from other countries such as Canada, China, and Japan, their language partners and home stay hosts helped them to experience English as a tool of communication.

*Through this program I could meet many native English speaking people and have chance to talk with them which is good*

*for improving my English ability. Also, experiencing culture helped me to understand language. (Code 19)*

The experience of chatting about their life, educational system, teaching practices, and their new cultural encounters led many teachers to realize that second language learning brings not only personal and professional development but also understanding of other countries and the world. By being exposed to many different situations and talking with people who use another language, KTEP teachers learned that language is not just for communication but also for exchanging and sharing ideas about how they see the world.

*Taking classes carried through English, experiencing home stay, and natural contact with English speaking people all contributed to improving my English. Also this continued English use helped me to understand Canadian culture because language is a significant factor in understanding culture. (Code 3)*

*Also, experiencing culture helped me to understand a language.*  
(Code 19)

### *Reframing Teacher as a Professional*

Despite their intensive university preparation, years of teaching experience, and hard work in lesson planning and preparation and preparing students for national examinations, many KTEP teachers spoke about developing an unanticipated professional consciousness during KTEP. They did not previously regard themselves as part of a profession (like doctors, lawyers, nurses, or prosecutors).

*I could reflect on my class which was far away from developing communicative competence of learners... Also I felt so much that teachers have to have enormous previous preparation to give new information and provide continuous repetition to help students to learn it .... I learned an attitude of a teacher. I felt how important an image a teacher shows to students is. (Code 6)*

Many KTEP teachers said that they were impressed by the enthusiastic attitude of their instructor and facilitators in class, and that these moments made them reflect seriously on their own attitudes and past practices in the classroom. Teachers who indicated that they had gained confidence in English use, had become aware of English speaking culture, and had gained ideas about how they could expose aspects of culture to their students as indirect experience also described learning about significant attitudes of a teacher.

*As a teacher, I feel that I have to give as much praise to students as possible. And Dr. B and facilitators were real professionals.*  
(Code 22)

This awakening desire to change has been described by Bilash (2006) in her work with teachers from Japan in a program with a similar structure to that of KTEP. Adapting Underhill (1989), Bilash has examined perturbations in teachers' thinking and actions through five stages of change: from unconscious inability/ignorance, to conscious inability/ignorance, to decisions to change, followed by the slow and time laden phase of developing conscious ability/knowledge to unconscious ability/knowledge. KTEP participants also revealed increased awareness and intentions to change their practices based on this developing awareness.

*BSLIM was good to learn and I want to plan my teaching based on students' Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983).*  
(Code 15)

*I want to try to use plain and easy English to my students since my anxiety with English use disappeared through this program.* (Code 16)

Through participation in KTEP, teachers realized what they had not been doing in their teaching, and why change in classroom practice might be a valuable way to help students to become more engaged and self-motivated to learn English. By the conclusion of KTEP, in a space of contemplation, humility, and positive anticipation, many teachers reported that they intend to try hard to put what they felt, learned, and gained during the program into their practice. This suggests that in being willing to make a conscious effort to make a change and develop their own ability and professionalism, they were able to find a new equilibrium.

*I learned that a teacher has to be very keen and specific in preparation and how a teacher should prepare students to do a presentation as a project ... I learned an attitude of a teacher in a way of planning and preparation for the class.* (Code 25)

### *Synergetic Potential of Understanding Difference*

Upon return to Korea, KTEP teacher participants are expected to share their experiences and impressions of their month in Canada with other teachers – through writing for the school newsletter, local newspaper, school board websites, and word of mouth. Typically they also tell family

and friends about their observations and experiences – both the similarities and differences that they noted. These stories spread to a broad audience and as such, help others to understand Canada and Korea in new ways. Similarly, Canadian facilitators have also had their views of Canada and Korea challenged. For the purpose of this paper two such anecdotes will be discussed. They involve feelings generated from a school visit and actions taken in everyday classroom interaction.

After the first school visit several participants wrote daily reflections about their feelings. The following is representative.

*I felt like they (staff in the school) treat us as inferior people. They are only good at English and we are a little poor at expressing our opinion in English. When we visited a school, I felt that even though they do not have anything better or new in teaching facilities and techniques [than we do] they said and behaved as if they were very superior to Koreans and to Korean education. One Canadian showed such a response [like he did not know or believe me] that he cannot understand when I explained that Korea is much more developed in information and communication technology. (Code 18)*

This comment not only underscores the fact that Canadian educators may need to re-examine their own ethnocentricities, develop a knowledge base about education in other countries and a critical-reflective attitude towards their own educational system and personal behaviour, but also the impact of that attitude on other fellow professionals, from other countries.

While activities in the remaining weeks of KTEP were able to help participating teachers better understand the Canadian education system and put some of the participants' feelings into perspective, it was not possible to discuss any of the observations with teachers or schools who generously opened their doors to these guests. Such has been identified as a goal of future KTEP programs. Happily, by the end of the program and after many hours of discussion and mediation with Canadian facilitators and fellow team members and leaders this same participant concluded:

*But it was good to see another culture in a different point of view.  
(Code 18)*

The second anecdote was revealed at the end of the program in reflection on a series of comments and gestures made by Koreans toward Canadian staff. The class on cultural difference described in the anecdote was the result of concerns and discomfort expressed by Canadian staff:

*After taking one hour class about cultural difference from Dr. B, I was surprised and felt how Canadians and Koreans are different. I was aware that repeated body touching, comments about appearance and [teasing about the] body can make people feel unpleasant. I was told that one of the staff had felt very unpleasant regardless of our intention to want to get close relationship as a friend between people. We did not notice that because he did not express his displeasure. In Korea, the behavior of playing jokes or touching someone can be understood as an expression of wanting to get friendly but it is not here in Canada.* (Code 14)

To reach an understanding (equilibrium) required effort from all sides. While the principle instructor acted as a mediator both with the leader of the KTEP delegation as well as between Korean participants and Canadian staff, both participants and staff had to find space for one-another's point of view (Bhabba, 1994). The explicit discussions about value differences were awkward for many (e.g., *I was really embarrassed while listening to Dr. B's saying* – Code 14). But as they also noted "but how else could we learn?" (Code 14). Going through this discomfort seems to be an unavoidable way to reach mutual understanding.

Cultural misunderstandings between Korean teachers of English and Canadians participating in KTEP created significant learning opportunities. After the initial discomfort of the conflict, the incidents became windows through which each side could reflect on their taken-for-granted frame of thoughts, values, and behaviours. Perturbations acted as experientially challenging conversations: "Emotions are not conversations, but we flow in our emotioning through the flow of our conversations" (Maturana, 1988, p. 53).

### *Cultural Differences as Resistance to Change*

Participants from both Korea and Canada experienced a variety of cultural differences throughout the KTEP program. While realizing that the way they think is not the same as the way those in another part of the world think, KTEP participants also acknowledged their struggles with cultural differences and the sensitivity required to negotiate a solution for both sides. For example, in Korea:

*Calling a name of an older/elder person is not familiar to Koreans. So Korean teachers were not pleased to hear young (Canadian) staff calling Mr. Kim's (the leader of Korean teachers) name.* (Code 14)

KTEP participants respectfully referred to their leader, who was the oldest in the group, by his title, *Danjangnim* (meaning a leader of a team in Korean) while the Canadian staff called him "Mr. Kim" which is a Canadian way of expressing respect. Korean teachers resisted the Canadian way of expressing respect because calling someone "Mr. XXX" in Korea is primarily heard in restaurants and is usually the way clients call their waiters. They argued that their leader should be shown the same respect in Canada that he would be shown in Korea. In contrast, the Canadian facilitators, all of whom had been on study abroad programs and were bilingual, believed that KTEP participants should learn and practice Canadian ways as a part of their cultural experience. Only after days of daily negotiation in and out of class did more of an acceptance of difference lead to some common ground. Again, *emotioning* flowed through these conversations on all sides.

Preconceived ideas affect how one thinks and behaves and also how and why one attempts to change the value systems encountered in cross-cultural experiences. Based on the taken-for-granted, both Koreans and Canadians started with and insisted on an established idea, rather than adjusting their selves to the other culture and value system. Interestingly, in noting other cultural differences as well, Korean participants spoke of how difficult it was to change.

*We Koreans usually play a joke to get close to each other. So to get close, we did play a joke on some staff but they took it differently. It seemed that there is a gap of thinking between them and us.*  
(Code 6)

*While experiencing home stay, I realized that roles of a man and a woman are very different from those in Korea. I never did chores at my home such as doing laundry, cooking or washing dishes but my hosts who are in 60s took turns when they prepared for their meals. It was shock to me.* (Code 13)

*I was surprised and felt Canadians are different ... I got to know that the [staff members] were very disappointed with and depressed by our way of not expressing our feelings well. They might expect to hear 'thank you,' 'please,' and 'I am sorry' as often as they do but we are not familiar with those expressions in Korean culture where we are rather likely to hide our feelings even if we have those feelings in mind.* (Code 14)

In light of the perturbations caused by cultural differences, KTEP participants suggested that future programs should provide participants with explicit instruction on cultural differences and on ways to build a healthy learning and teaching environment for both Korean and Canadian participants.

*I hope an instruction on cultural difference will be at the beginning of the program to help KTEP members and staff not to misunderstand each other. (Code 14)*

Whether or not such solutions are essentialistic and problematic in their own right, in building a continued long term cross cultural relationship it will be important to respond to their suggestions.

### *Discussion*

As Korean teachers of English indicated, KTEP contributed to improving various dimensions of their professional development, including language, culture, and pedagogy. The teachers reported that they gained confidence in using English, and wanted to use more English in the classroom when they returned to Korea. They gained a wide range of cultural understanding through the varied activities offered inside and outside the classroom in Canada, experienced a new professional teacher attitude from the program instructor and facilitators, and developed ideas and plans to apply what they learned in Canada to their classroom practice. It is premature to assert the success of the program because we do not yet know how much change will take place in the teaching practice of KTEP participants. However, signs of the impact of KTEP already align with other research: changes in teacher thinking (Hayes, 1997), increased awareness of one's practices and beliefs (Bilash, 2006), and affirmations of one's current practice (Freeman, cited in Hayes, 1997). This paper adds another factor to this list – the ability to confront and understand differences in people, to question one's taken-for-granted value systems and to negotiate how to live well together. In so doing, KTEP participants were perturbed, pushed out of equilibrium and eventually found mutual and supportive understanding of one another.

### *Closing*

What this study implies for future study-abroad teacher education programs is that relationships between leaders of teams is very important in helping participants to understand socio-cultural differences; these must be made explicit, explained, and shared in formal

and informal meetings between leaders and other team members. Leaders' understanding and knowledge about the new culture and target language proficiency level will play a crucial role in reducing struggles, confronting emotions, and leading the programs to success. Participants' patience with cultural difference, however, will be the most crucial factor in achieving mutual cultural understanding. The positive role of conflict and perturbations and learning to talk through misunderstanding should be seen as a primary form of pedagogy in study abroad contexts. As Maturana and Varela report,

Coherence and harmony in relations and interactions between the members of a human social system are due to the coherence and harmony of their growth in it, in an ongoing social learning which their own social (linguistic) operation defines and which is possible thanks to the genetic and ontogenetic processes that permit structural plasticity of the members. (1987, p. 199)

## NOTES

1. Although no statistics to support this statement are available one only needs to look at the fact that studying a foreign language is a compulsory part of the majority of high school curricula throughout the world coupled with the additional fact that most people with high school diplomas do not travel beyond the borders of their own country.

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