Korean EFL Teachers’ Beliefs Regarding English Language Reading Instruction

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While there has been substantial research into language teachers’ beliefs and their connection to practice, less attention has been to EFL teachers’ beliefs about foreign language reading instruction. This study investigated Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs about foreign language reading instruction to better illuminate what teachers’ beliefs are and how the educational experiences they felt shaped their beliefs. A qualitative design was used to describe teachers’ interpretations of their experiences. Twenty-one Korean teachers reflected on their beliefs about English reading instruction in Korea. Reflection data showed that respondents identified biographical experiences as affecting their beliefs about teaching second-language reading. Many highlighted the importance of knowing the learner and considering learners’ emotions as key aspects of effective reading instruction. Korean English teachers’ beliefs about second language reading instruction are impacted by several previously unidentified influences that arise from outside the classroom context.

This work was supported by Pusan National University Research Grant, 2015.

I. INTRODUCTION

Beliefs have been defined as “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions felt to be true. As a result, beliefs are the permeable and dynamic structures that act as a filter through which new knowledge and experience are screened for meaning”. (Zheng, 2009, p. 74). In general, novice teachers’ beliefs about teaching have been found to be well established by the time they arrive at college (Weinstein, 1989). Their
beliefs are formed by their own educational experiences (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). The beliefs that originate from the “apprenticeship” of attending school include ideas about what it takes to be an effective teacher and how students should behave (Borg, 2004).

In the Korean context, the majority of current Korean teachers were students at a time when their teachers relied on rote memorization and text analysis (Park, 1999) with lessons based on grammar translation (Song, 2000). Thus, current teachers’ beliefs about language instruction have been influenced by the form-focused grammar-translation approaches that they experienced as students rather than the meaning-oriented communicative approaches favored by current methodologists. As a consequence, while many espouse communicative beliefs, their practice reflects a traditional grammar-translation based orientation (Yook, 2011). Novice teachers, including those in Korea (see Kim, 2002), also often begin training with teacher-centered transmission-oriented views (Peacock, 2001) which threatens their development as communicative language teachers.

These problematic background influences contribute to novice teachers tending to forget or misunderstand ideas and to misinterpret the messages of their education program course to justify their current beliefs and assumptions about themselves, language, teaching learners, and learning (Almarza, 1996; Lamb, 1995). Accordingly, novice Korean teachers risk misinterpreting the content of their reading instruction classes to inappropriately justify their continuing to use discredited methods like grammar-translation that they experienced as students themselves. To avoid this undesirable outcome, novice teacher beliefs must be investigated to understand what their beliefs are and what shapes their beliefs. Understanding exactly what novice teacher beliefs are and the specific influences that shape those beliefs may enable researchers and teacher educators’ to devise strategies to influence those beliefs in more productive ways.

In contrast to some views on the relative inflexibility of teacher beliefs, a number of researchers have found that teachers’ beliefs can be reconceptualised through classroom experiences and training (Flores, 1993; Guskey, 1986). Altering flawed beliefs is thought to be essential because
beliefs impact teachers’ classroom behavior (Andrews 2003; Borg, 2003; Woods 1996). In order to promote positive change in teacher beliefs about teaching and learning, researchers and teacher educators need to more clearly understand teachers’ personal and vicarious experience, and socio-cultural influences on their beliefs (Ertmer, 2005). The first step in understanding teachers’ experiences and influences is identifying precisely what those experiences and influences are.

Therefore the primary aim of this research is to identify the beliefs of novice Korean EFL teachers about second language reading instruction and what kinds of events and experiences they perceive to have shaped their beliefs. Korean teachers’ beliefs about reading have not received much research attention previously so the findings can improve understanding of some of the unique beliefs that novice Korean EFL teachers have. Understanding these beliefs is particularly important because of their potential to affect L2 literacy instruction and learner L2 reading proficiency.

To address the gap in the current research literature on teachers’ beliefs about second and foreign language reading in Korea, the following questions have been posed: (1) What kinds of experiences do novice teachers say shape their beliefs about effective second language reading instruction? (2) What do novice Korean EFL teachers believe about foreign language reading instruction in Korean classrooms?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of pertinent themes were identified in the review of extant literature associated with teacher beliefs and second and foreign language reading instruction. Themes included biographical influences on teacher beliefs, instructional beliefs, and the relationship between beliefs and practices.

1. Biographical Beliefs
Sociocultural context was identified as one type of biographical influence impacting teachers’ beliefs. For instance, the fact that pleasure reading was not highly valued in parts of Indonesia was thought to negatively influence teachers’ beliefs about its importance (Murtiningsih, 2014). Family affected teachers’ beliefs about reading as well. It was found that “Reading for pleasure was minimally encouraged… [and] if pleasure reading was not encouraged by family then this seemed to affect teachers’ later beliefs about the value of reading…” (Murtiningsih, 2014, p. 101). A second biographical factor discussed was teachers’ their own experiences as language learners and teachers. Student teachers in one EFL context claimed that “they had limited knowledge on teaching L2 reading because they had never seen their teachers teaching it” (Murtiningsih, 2014, p. 135). In a study of native-speaking teachers teaching in an ESL context, Reeves (2009) found that participants’ biographical experiences constrained their beliefs about the target language structure and its acquisition. Likewise, background variables such as gender and major field of study have an effect on student beliefs about L2 learning (Kim, 2006). With regards to the classroom context, institutional constraints, school culture, and norms affects Korean teachers’ classroom practice and willingness to try innovative methods (Shin, 2012). This research indicates that adverse contextual circumstances can constrain teachers’ beliefs in unproductive ways.

2. Instructional Beliefs

Several researchers investigated reading teachers’ instructional beliefs. El-Okda (2005) points out that “student teachers of English come to the methods courses with pre-existing beliefs about teaching the reading skill. Those beliefs constitute what might be called a sub-system of beliefs about teaching a foreign language…” (p. 52). Teachers’ beliefs about the relative importance of reading in the second/foreign language curriculum were mixed. On the one hand, Indonesian student teachers believed that reading skills were less important than speaking for them and their students (Murtiningsih, 2014). In contrast, Macalister (2010) found that most of the (admittedly ESL) teachers he studied had “positive beliefs about the language learning
benefits of extensive reading, and that almost all encourage their students to read for pleasure” (p. 68).

Teacher beliefs about L2 reading classroom practices included pre-service teachers believing interest in L2 reading can be fostered by developing less formal student–teacher relationships (Murtiningsih, 2014). Others emphasized not delaying literacy instruction and teacher modeling of reading to both aid independent student silent reading and improve learner pronunciation (El-Okda, 2005). Beliefs about oral reading aloud were somewhat divided. Some student teachers actually equated it with reading and thought it improved learner pronunciation (El-Okda, 2005) or that it developed reading accuracy, vocabulary, and general comprehension (Kuzborska 2011). Others thought that oral reading hinders comprehension and that learners learn more from regular opportunities to practice silent reading instead (Graden 1996). Many EFL teachers also emphasized that knowledge of all vocabulary in the reading text was vital for comprehension (El-Okda, 2005; Kuzborska, 2011; Murtiningsih, 2014).

In-service EFL teachers stressed the importance of teaching reading strategies. They named guessing unclear vocabulary, scanning the text, and self-questioning to check comprehension as being particularly valuable to learners (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014). Translation appeared to be more controversial as EFL teachers in one study reported that it was “essential for advanced level students and that the full comprehension of a text could only occur through its translation into L1” (Kuzborska, 2011, p. 114). However, it was found to be the least important strategy in Bamanger and Gashan’s (2014) study.

Strangely, extant research literature on teacher beliefs has not given much attention to learner affect. However, Meyer and Turner (2007) note that instructional strategies for engaging in emotional scaffolding are based on a foundation of “establishing and maintaining positive teacher–student relationships…” (p. 248). Other investigations have revealed that effective emotional scaffolders are able to tailor the content to the developmental level and unique learning needs of their learners (McCaughtry, 2004). They also skilfully draw learners’ attention to how to investigate
problems as well as make references to their shared cultures and to popular culture to build rapport with learners (Rosiek, 2003).

This line of research connects to the present study through the shared assumption that teachers must pay close attention to students’ emotional states in the classroom because their emotional states greatly impact their learning. However, there are also some significant distinctions between that research and the current study. For instance, the present research focuses on teachers’ beliefs and cognitions while that research centers on classroom dynamics and the relationship between the teacher and student. Additionally, that research focuses on native speaking learning contexts while the current study investigates foreign language settings. The existence of these fundamental distinctions underscores the considerable need for additional research into language teachers’ beliefs about the role of emotions in the language learning process. This oversight in the current research literature is somewhat unexpected considering the increasing recognition affect has received as a crucial factor in both first language (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and second language literacy development (Protacio, 2012; Taboada & McElvany, 2009).

3. Comparing Beliefs and Practices

Findings comparing beliefs and practice were mixed. Some research identifies a close correspondence between the two (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014; Kuzborska, 2011; Murtiningsih, 2014; Zheng, 2009). Bamanger and Gashan (2014) even argued that “in order to change teachers’ practices, there is a need to change their beliefs about these practices” (p. 20). Other studies reported inconsistencies between beliefs and instructional practices. However, these discrepancies were attributed to teachers having to compromise their beliefs due to low student ability (Graden, 1996) or local contextual (Macalister, 2010) or even cultural (El-Okda, 2005) constraints on the viability of implementing believed best practices in the local context.

Conflicting beliefs about students’ reading abilities were reported as well. EFL teachers in one high-school context stated that their students had negative attitudes toward reading as well as minimal vocabulary and
comprehension ability (Murtiningsih, 2014). This result contrasted with findings at the post-secondary level. Kuzborska (2011) found “a commonly held belief by all the teachers was that the advanced level students had already developed their reading skills and that they could read and study new words by themselves” (p. 119). Consequently, teachers only assigned reading tasks for homework and offered minimal support to scaffold learners’ of technical vocabulary or academic text genres. This research occurred to two separate and quite dissimilar EFL contexts (Indonesia and Ukraine, respectively) so it is unrealistic to compare the findings. Nevertheless, it leads one to wonder about teachers’ assumptions. Could beliefs about students’ inability in secondary school versus assumed abilities in post-secondary contexts result in learners not receiving the support they need to comprehend challenging vocabulary and complex academic text?

Despite the rapidly expanding research literature into this area, there are still a number of questions that require further examination. For instance, although there is a sizable and growing literature on EFL teachers’ beliefs (see Zheng, 2009) there appears to be limited extant investigation of Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs outside of their views on communicative language teaching (Choi, 2000; Li, 1998; Jeon, 2009), English-only instruction (Jeon, 2008) and task-based teaching (Jeon, 2006). However, given the importance of literacy for English language development and the vital role that teachers play in fostering literacy development their views on the topic should be taken into account. Additionally, several researchers point out that the research literature on investigating EFL teachers’ beliefs is scarce (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014; Borg, 2006) and relatively few studies have explored the connection between teacher cognition and second or foreign language reading instruction (El-Okda, 2005; Macalister, 2010). Indeed, there appears to be no extant research on teachers’ beliefs about foreign language reading in the Korean EFL context.

III. METHOD

1. Participants
Twenty-one participants were recruited for this study. They ranged in age from their mid-twenties through late thirties. All had bachelor degrees from a variety of fields though the majority were education majors. Of the 21 participants in the study, 5 had no teaching experience while the remaining sixteen ranged in experience from one to as much as five years. Their English proficiency was generally intermediate through advanced as a pre-requisite to entering the program. They were chosen for this research because they were relatively novice EFL teachers. Additional research with novice teachers can help researchers is necessary to more clearly understand the beliefs of beginning teachers as they enter the profession due to the influence that their beliefs have on their classroom practice (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014; Kuzborska, 2011; Murtiningsih, 2014; Zheng, 2009).

2. Design

Methods for this study draw upon a “generic qualitative study” (Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2008; Lichtman, 2012; Merriam, 2009) and general inductive approach (Dey, 1993; Thomas, 2003). This method represents teachers’ experiences and their interpretations of those experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Novice Korean English teachers were asked to submit written reflections on their beliefs about English reading instruction in Korea as part of a 160 hour graduate-level TESOL certificate class in second-language literacy instructional methods that they were taking as part of a TESOL certificate. The certificate consisted of seven courses on subjects including: second language acquisition, teaching pronunciation, teaching listening and speaking, teaching English grammar, teaching young learners and CALL. The program was housed in the lifelong learning centre of a large research-oriented university in a major metropolitan area in Korea.

3. Procedure

The participants read about and discussed methodological approaches and techniques for teaching reading in a second or foreign language. They wrote four reflection papers where they were asked to reflect on the content they
were learning in the course and relate it to their own experience as a learner and/or teacher. They were also encouraged to comment on issues the coursework made them think about, what they thought they learned and how might use their newly-acquired knowledge in their teaching. Qualitative analysis of these reflection essays revealed several themes related to their beliefs about English language reading instruction in Korea.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and iterative throughout the study as data were analyzed inductively and recursively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The analysis was accomplished based on the constant comparative method of iteratively coding data sets and drafting analytical memos to generate themes that addressed the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding began with open coding of the written reflection data using the RQDA package for the R data analysis software.

Data coding was approached in the following manner. During preliminary coding, the researcher read all the reflection essays while making notes in the margins to identify possible codes. The researcher engaged in both descriptive coding and in vivo coding to sort data into initial themes. Revisited preliminary categories were then collapsed or less useful codes eliminated into analytic codes until the researcher identified the central themes in the data (Lichtman, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Lastly, the researcher organized the code categories into an overall unified structure of related categories and subcategories that included the major themes and addressed the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Gibbs, 2007).

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are presented below according to themes that address each of the study’s research questions.
1. RQ 1: Experiences that Shape Respondents’ Beliefs about Second Language Reading Instruction

1) School-based Experiences

Their own biographical experiences learning English affected respondents’ particular beliefs about teaching reading. A number of them talked about their personal experiences of EFL reading instruction which they tended to associate with particular places and times in their lives. While recounting their experiences, they also shared insights they thought they gained from their personal experiences.

Several respondents recounted their experiences learning to read in English in public school where the majority reported negative experiences. One common grievance was the sense of pressure that they faced. For Eunice, this began in elementary school where she had to record how many books she read and write numerous book reports. As a result, she complained, “I felt like reading a book was not joyful, but it was burden to me.” Some respondents also reported feeling frustration in middle and high school where “boring” teaching methods were combined with “highstress” tests. These methods included translating difficult ungraded English materials into Korean. Evelyn noted that this experience taught her that "choosing adequate level books should be the first step for all kinds of reading activity. "That is, rather than having to painstakingly translate texts that were too difficult for them, she advocated simply reading texts that were at their level. For others, these boring methods also killed an initial love of reading. Susan lamented,

I still remember the bitter pain I used to have in English classes. The class was totally controlled by the teacher. Most of the teaching approaches that teacher used were traditional and boring and there was a little chance of flourishing creativity from my side.

Respondents were also frustrated by the “high stress” they experienced from focusing on developing their English to improve exam scores. They
criticized testing that seemed meaningless and complained, "students are afraid of being tested because they well know that results will be employed to compare scores of students [to] one another" (Gloria). Although these comments reflect the attitude of the majority of respondents, not everyone remembered their school experiences with such disapproval. Speaking of the form-focused exercises she did at school, Carrie noted “I believe it led to useful insights into language use.” Thus, these methods were not necessarily seen as boring by all respondents.

Negative experiences with learning English continued in university for some. University was where onerous amounts of reading killing motivation and the love of literature that brought Mariana to her major. It was also at University that Natalie “always struggled” to keep an English diary every day because “there was no feedback about my writing.” However, as with the public school, not all postsecondary school experiences were negative. As an undergraduate, Jane discovered a “really good and impressive” book that “was not for any tests” and “no one gave an order to read.” Reading the book allowed her to get into the flow and enjoy the experience of reading in English for the first time. However, it must be pointed out that she accomplished this through her own volition and not with any outside support.

2) Family Experiences

In addition to their school experiences, respondents mentioned several positive reading–related memories they shared with family members. Angie and Rachel both shared the belief that reading aloud to their children developed the children’s interest in reading. Angie stated “I focused on reading most of all and now my kids enjoy books.” Rachel exclaimed, “You cannot imagine how magic the reading is. Especially when my kids were young around 7 years old, we had been spending a lot of time to read the bedtime story. They really listen to the story from my sweet voice with dynamic expression.” Both reveal their belief about the dramatic impact they had on her children’s interest in reading through reading aloud to them. This practice is widely endorsed by first (Fox, 2012; Trelease, 2006) and second
(Amer, 1997; Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011) language literacy experts as well.

Becky discussed helping her 77 year old mother and 57 year old sister learn how to read in English. She wrote that she was “really happy” that her mother asked her to teach her the English alphabet because she needed it at church. She said “I wrote down the alphabets on the paper for her very happily and she started to memorize right away.” She also shared the example of her sister who could not attend middle school because of the family’s financial circumstances. “She is fifty-seven years old woman but she needs somebody’s help whenever she should take care about resetting with passwords of her smart-phone banking system or her e-mail account.” This story reveals how Becky’s English literacy tutoring allows her sister to protect sensitive financial information. Becky concludes that “…I am happy that I can read and could take care of my mom or my sister when they need my help regarding numbers or English.” Both of these examples demonstrate Becky’s belief in the importance of English literacy in modern Korea and were shaped by her experience as a daughter and sister.

3) Experiences Abroad

A final influence that shaped respondents’ beliefs was their experiences visiting or living in other countries. Experiences living in Canada influenced two respondents’ views regarding the value of extensive reading. Carrie recounted her time in a Canadian high school where she “had to read a novel a month.” Her teacher told her to “choose easy and intriguing book to read on my own” and “skip when I encounter unknown words but highlight them to check the meaning later.” Her description shows the teacher’s apparent desire for Carrie to engage in extensive reading. Carrie commented that “as for me this method was a great help to develop my fluency as well as vocabulary. This positive experience has been leading me to tell my students to do the same way when they read a book.” Carrie’s comments reveal that her experience of doing extensive reading in Canada has caused her to believe in its value and to recommend the practice to her own students.
A postsecondary university preparation ESL class in Canada allowed Julie to get experience with extensive reading which she claimed developed her fluency. She mentioned a class where she was given time to engage in extensive reading for enjoyment which she stated really helped motivate her to read. She reported that it was actually “extremely helpful” when she started studying in university. To her mind, the most valuable result of her extensive reading was that

...building a habit of reading a book contributed a lot for improvement in English proficiency and even expansion of my knowledge...I would like to employ the idea of extensive reading when I start teaching English to help learners be more fluent in reading (Julie).

Both Carrie and Julie indicate that their experiences in Canadian schools impacted their thinking regarding the value of using extensive reading as a way to improve English language ability.

Nevertheless, not everyone’s time spent abroad was positive. Eunice described negative experiences she had in a US high school history class where she had to read aloud a summary she wrote of the textbook in a “round-robin” style activity. She recounted how “...every day I really stressed about US history class and practiced before class. I totally understand how students might feel reading aloud in English class...” Oddly, Eunice expressed that the round robin reading was a very negative experience for her but she still used the same teaching technique in her own classes. She also stated that, prior to writing the reflection, she had not even given much consideration to the fact that she was using an activity in her classes that she hated as a student. Thus, it appears that while her negative experience shaped her beliefs about reading instruction in that she thought reading aloud was unpleasant. However, it did not change her practice because she continued to unreflectively use it with her own students.
4) Teaching Experiences

Several respondents identified their experiences as a teacher of English as affecting their beliefs. One personal teaching experience mentioned was using extensive reading in their classroom. Angie noted that “personally I like teaching related with extensive reading and I encourage students [to] choose books which they want and enjoy reading.” Darlene added that she hoped extensive reading in the classroom will spill outside of the classroom and encourage a reading habit. She says this is already happening in her homeroom Korean classes and she hopes to transition to doing the same thing in English.

Not all teaching experiences resulted in strong endorsements of extensive reading. For instance, Eunice connected her negative experiences as an elementary student to those as a teacher. She noted that the process has been “slightly changed” compared to when she went to school. She described how now the focus is on doing extensive reading with the aim of pushing the student to have higher aspirations. Eunice says she has “doubt about it.” Her main concerns seem to stem from the fact that even though students can review books in a more fun way by incorporating art into their reviews she is compelled by administration to make them write book reports. She complains that as she experienced as a student “writing [a] book review as homework made me under-pressured, so I know just giving students writing book review as homework is not good way for students.” These remarks illustrate how her own negative experience as a student and then teacher shaped her beliefs about the effectiveness of a reading program.

Respondents connected their own biographical experiences learning English to their particular beliefs about teaching reading. These teachers then draw on their own experiences as readers for unique insight into how it feels to receive bad instruction. For instance, several referred to their own negative experiences as students in k-12 schools or post-secondary contexts. Some stated that these experiences showed them what to avoid doing as reading teachers themselves. Other biographical experiences discussed included how helping family members learn to read in English influenced their beliefs about the value of reading aloud and the importance of English literacy in
contemporary Korea. As well, respondent teaching experiences using classroom activities like extensive reading lead them to believe in the benefits of the activity for learners if it was not connected to onerous writing activities.

Previous research has highlighted the impact that prior experiences and teacher education had on teacher beliefs. Family was discussed as affecting teachers’ beliefs about reading in one study as well. Murtiningsih (2014) reported that family’s failure to encourage their children to read for pleasure appeared to impact the teacher’s later views on the general importance of reading. Respondents in the present study also mentioned the effect their family had on their beliefs. However, in this case the effect related more to how respondents’ current support of their family’s English development has helped them realize of the importance of English rather than the influence that their family’s support of their English development had on them.

Findings from the present research concur with previous studies that teachers’ own experience as students affects their beliefs about the educational process (Johnson, 1994; Numrich, 1996). Novice teachers in other EFL contexts downplayed the effect of their own teachers for reading instruction because they said their teachers did not teach reading in their classes (Murtiningsih, 2014). This was not the case in the present study as several respondents noted that their teachers did teach reading. However, many respondents in this study did not approve of the way they were taught to read and stated that they taught reading differently than the way their teachers had taught them. Thus, unlike previous claims of teachers teaching as they were taught, these respondents claimed that they consciously taught in ways that they reacted to the bad instruction they believed they had received themselves.

2. RQ 2: Korean EFL Teachers’ Beliefs about Second Language Reading Instruction in Korean Classrooms

1) Knowing the Learner
One set of beliefs several respondents had in common that has not received significant attention in previous research literature relates to the importance of knowing the learner in the foreign language reading class. An aspect of this theme quite a few respondents identified was the significance of building student background knowledge. Susan stated that “students” lack of prior knowledge, expectations and other background knowledge related with the text” was a cause of their having “trouble in comprehension of the text.” Additional benefits of students having broad background knowledge were that it can allow them to “predict … the text more easily” (Sally) and “the more background knowledge that a reader brings to skimming, the faster the skimming speed is likely to be” (Christy). Clark also noted the connection between background knowledge and interest saying that many students are not interested in school textbooks because “it is not familiar.”

A number of respondents also praised extensive reading as an effective way to build background knowledge. For instance, Evelyn pointed out that extensive reading can be “a way of gaining knowledge of the world.” Recognizing the limited background knowledge learners often bring to texts, Beth stated that “learners do not have plenty of information of how reading a lot works for them to build up their schema.” She resolved to address students’ lack of information by giving “…students enough information of the importance of reading extensively to make them to be aware of the effect on their further study.”

Knowledge of students’ unique characteristics was another aspect of beliefs about knowing the learner mentioned by respondents. Some of the characteristics they identified included: “aptitude,” “age,” “learning style (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic),” and “personalities.” Rachel showed her belief in the need to pay attention to the unique characteristics of learners with the following story where she described how she prepares for storytelling. She comments that

We need to have some naughty guys focus on me and listen up [sic] my story. And also we have to check out continually that they are following the story well. And at the same time we need to give the shy students many chances to present their thoughts. Because they are
already enough focusing on me. But they never present first before being pointed by teacher. They just need to be brave in the classroom to express their thoughts.

These comments reveal her belief in the need to consider how different students will react to an activity like sharing a story based on their background characteristics.

Respondents distinguished several ways that teachers should respond to learners’ unique characteristics. Several suggested “more delicate planning” as well as the need to choose materials and activities that matched learners’ abilities, language proficiency, and learning level. They also recommended activities that accounted for the “gap between cognitive development [i.e., maturity] and English proficiency” or that were suited to the “particular needs” of their learners. Evelyn illustrates this belief in the need to tailor reading fluency instruction to learner’s individual needs when she observes:

There is no point in reading faster if little is understood. In my opinion, the speed shouldn’t be compared with other students. All learners have their own pace and as far as they understand well, a little difference in speed doesn’t [sic] important.

This statement shows her concern with differentiating the classroom activities to account for the unique needs of students that was also reflected in several others’ responses.

The comments above reveal how respondents’ expressed belief in the importance of knowing the learner in the foreign language reading class. This knowledge included awareness of students’ unique characteristics such as aptitude, age, learning style, and personalities. They believed that this knowledge was necessary in order to carefully plan and choose suitable materials and activities to properly differentiate instruction for their learners.

The bulk of existing research literature on the content of Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs about EFL teaching and learning has tended to focus upon the interests and concerns of the teacher rather than those of the learner (McLean & Bullard, 2000). In particular, there has been greater attention
paid to teacher beliefs about particular instructional practices. For example, extant investigations into Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs center primarily upon their views on communicative language teaching (Choi, 2000), English-only instruction (Jeon, 2008) and task-based teaching (Jeon, 2006). The same can be said for teacher beliefs research related to L2 literacy. This research has also generally focused on beliefs about particular instructional methods such as those for teaching reading strategies (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014), reading aloud (El-Okda, 2005; Graden 1996), as well as vocabulary and translation (Kuzborska, 2011; Bamanger & Gashan, 2014) rather than understanding the learner.

Previous research into beliefs about learners did not highlight the importance of knowing as much as possible about the learner. Instead, previous studies discussed teacher beliefs about learner ability or motivation. For instance, previous findings presented specific beliefs about how high-school students’ negative attitudes and lack of literacy ability might be ameliorated by encouraging less formal student–teacher relationships (Murtiningsih, 2014). Other findings were that post-secondary learners were believed to be better prepared to engage in independent reading of technical L2 materials than they actually were (Kuzborska, 2011). However, participants in the current study focused more on how knowledge of their learner’s background can improve literacy instruction. While understanding teachers’ beliefs about student ability and motivation is obviously important, it is also necessary for researchers to pay greater attention to teachers’ beliefs regarding the relationship between learners’ backgrounds and L2 reading instruction for a number of reasons.

First, a clearer understanding of teachers’ beliefs about learners’ background provides researchers with a more complete picture of this essential yet previously overlooked aspect of teacher’s beliefs. This enhanced understanding then gives us a more accurate and comprehensive model of teacher cognition as a whole. Secondly, current language instructional methods increasingly acknowledge the learner as being at the center of the teaching and learning process (e.g., Jones, 2007). Given this methodological shift in emphasis from teacher to learner, it logically follows that researchers and teacher-educators would want to have a more nuanced understanding of
what teachers believe about learners so that we ascertain how well their beliefs are in accord with what we currently understand to be positive and productive mindsets for teachers to have. Lastly, knowledge of teachers’ beliefs can help teacher educators examine the kinds of beliefs they have to eventually learn whether those beliefs lead to teacher classroom practices that promote efficient and effective teaching and learning.

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2) The Role of Affect and Emotions

Another major aspect of knowledge of the learner discussed in reflections and interviews was the role of affect and emotions in EFL reading. Affect and emotions included several components such as student interest, text selection, motivation, enjoyment, and negative emotions. For example, Angie noted that interest “seems to be a very important thing to keep reading.” Respondents emphasized the significance of choosing “materials related to learners’ interest…” (Anna). A core aspect of “interesting” materials mentioned was that teachers need to consider “students’ present vocabulary level” and use graded readers in the classroom to do extensive reading that focuses on maintaining student “attention on the meaning of the text” (Evelyn) as well as being “proper length [with]…easy grammar and decodable text” (Joyce).

Some respondents commented on how choosing the right text affects student interest. Eunice agreed with Evelyn that self-selected extensive reading generates interest. Eunice recommended comics as stimulating materials. She pointed out that “most of students don’t like to read long texts [but] they prefer to read comic [sic] so I allow them to read comic in class with hope to develop their love of reading.” She did not seem to care about the content of the comic as long as it raised their interest in reading English. Anna shared the view that comics can be beneficial for learners, but emphasized that she does not just let students read any comic they like. Comics in her classroom must also have educational content in order for them to be considered acceptable materials for her classes. In contrast to these motivating materials, Clark offered school textbooks as examples of texts that were not very interesting. He criticized school texts for being “very standardized” with “many unknown words” and these shortcomings cause the texts to be “not familiar or interesting.”

A number of participants highlighted the central role of motivation in the second language reading classroom. Gloria discussed teaching practices that can maintain student motivation. These included giving learners “time to read for enjoyment” and “providing plenty of interesting and appropriate reading texts.” When deciding what qualifies as an interesting text, she contends the
teacher should accept that the “learners’ judgement should get priority.” That is, texts should be chosen by the learner. Other motivating activities included looking at “the book cover first and talk[ing] about the topic first,” as well as “keeping a graph of learners’ speed, comprehension, and a number of readings” so they “can easily see the progress through the graph”. However, Evelyn stressed not using graphs to compare students to each other because “less proficient students will be discouraged with their progress.”

Teaching practices believed to be demotivating included forcing students to translate materials that were too difficult. Recalling doing this activity as a student, Evelyn states “I remember the frustrating feelings clearly till now.” In addition to doing challenging tasks with difficult materials, Gloria singled out standardized tests as being quite demotivating. She points out that “one of the biggest problems which this type of assessment has is that students are likely to be highly demotivated” because “they well know that results will be employed to compare scores of students one another.” Here again, we see the belief that comparison leads to demotivation.

The notion of “reading for joy” was another major theme that arose in several reflections. Comments indicated some respondents’ belief in a separation between reading to study, which they claim is what most Koreans do, and reading for enjoyment, which is what most “native speakers” do. Angie, for instance, distinguished how western reading instruction incorporates "reading for joy...but mostly here in Korea, reading is considered with study or textbook." She added that native English learners like to read various text genres including cartoons, scary books, and sports magazines, but these are not usually found in Korean schools. She asserts that Korean schools should incorporate more free voluntary reading because “when L2 learners choose a target language book naturally and for a joy, our way of education can get it right.” Carrie made this distinction between reading for enjoyment and reading for study as well. She said she wanted to learn through ways that were enjoyable when she was in school and not through the intensive grammar translation methods that were practiced. As a result, she said, now she does not perform well on standardized tests.

Respondents stated reading itself can be a source of enjoyment that can be the impetus to read more and improve their language abilities. Angie
contends that “as a goal in its own right, reading can be a source of enjoyment and a way of gaining knowledge of the world. As learners gain skill and fluency in reading, their enjoyment can increase.” Reflecting on her own personal experience, she observed that “the interest component seems to be a very important thing to keep reading.” Angie admitted that she does not usually finish books herself that are “a bit difficult or lack of interest” for her. However, she explained that “in the case which I chose an interesting easy book not only for a study but for a joy, I could finish the books easily.” Julie discussed how an “intense” class at a Canadian school was “really successful in helping [her] get more fluent in reading in English.” She attributed that success to the fact that the teacher “always gave us time to read for enjoyment and her class really helped me feel motivated to read. I started to spend more time reading a novel written in English.” These remarks highlight their belief in the role of enjoyment as a motivator to propel reading and learning forward.

3) Teaching Practices Believed to Foster Enjoyment

In addition to identifying the importance of fostering enjoyment in teaching reading, several respondents also reflected on what the reading teacher can do to bring enjoyment to their classes. Suggestions put forth included involving parents in their child’s literacy. Angie commented that “parents should give a lot of experience including reading to children and read various books as many as possible.” She gave herself as an example claiming, “I focused on reading most of all and now my kids enjoy books.”

Appropriate text choice was also mentioned as important influence on student enjoyment. This was claimed to be achieved through “providing plenty of interesting and appropriate reading texts…” (Erin). Graded readers and comic books were both identified as being appropriate texts. Mariana said her students read comics during their free voluntary reading time because they enjoy them and like to talk about them with each other. However, as was touched on above, others qualified their approval of comics in their classes. Heather stressed that enjoyment comes from reading about subjects that you are interested in and not necessarily reading comic books.
Thus, teachers should focus on discovering what topics interest their learners rather than trying to bring in materials that are entertaining but devoid of content. Similarly, Anna stated that she will only allow learners to read comic books if they have some kind of educational value. She also did not agree with allowing learners to read anything they wanted simply because it was entertaining. In her thinking, the teacher is responsible to introduce learners to materials that have some kind of educational value.

Some teachers emphasized the importance of giving learners opportunities to engage in extensive reading as a way to build their interest. Instead of simply trying to persuade learners about how enjoyable extensive reading is, Angie suggested just giving them opportunities to read to experience it for themselves. She also cautioned that “extensive reading text should be familiar with learners and consisted [sic] of most known words and very few unknown words.” Anna agreed adding that the “…teacher should teach high frequency vocabulary and provide the material which is matched to students’ abilities and experiences.” In other words, teachers should choose texts at the proper level and adequately prepare students to read them to ensure learner interest will be piqued by extensive reading.

Besides ensuring that texts are at a suitable language level for learners, considering compelling stories and content was noted as being a priority. In fact, Anna contended that “the most importance [sic] to consider is learners’ interest, because enjoying story gives learners power to overcome difficulties.” That is, to her, a captivating story is what will push learners to persist through the inevitable difficulties they experience as they read. In terms of how to incorporate content to generate learner interest, respondents maintain teachers need to pay attention to “…concern[s] which learners have” (Angie) and put learners in contact with texts that have “interesting topic and characters…” (Joyce).

Engaging in “fun” activities were seen by some respondents as being an effective way of maintaining learner interest. Thus, they also saw their responsibility as making reading fun for their learners. For instance, Jane maintained that “to keep students’ interest in English, reading with fun can be one of the best ways to help them.” Eunice offered some methods for keeping reading fun by making sure classroom tasks are “active.” Examples
of such activities include TPR which is “fun to use learners’ body and moving around” and “reading aloud and making comprehensible [sic] questions.” Students generating their own comprehension questions presumably allows them to engage with the text meaning more actively.

In their discussions of English reading enjoyment, several respondents touched upon what might be termed “joy killers” that syphon the pleasure out of reading in English. Excessive testing was named as a cause of learners losing interest in English reading. Rachel shows her belief that tests discourage young learners’ interest with her assertion that the “grammar, vocabulary or word test are worth nothing for elementary or young children. There should be only just fun.” Reflecting on her experiences as a student, Evelyn related that

Similar with most of the Korean students, I only read texts just for answering the questions from exam. I was trained to catch main meaning, wrong grammar, and translate short articles as fast as I can so that I could get a high score from the exams. I think the approach for reading made me have no interest in reading, because I considered reading as a hard task that I have to deal with until I started to read for enjoyment after graduating from high school.

Evelyn’s comment also shows that an approach to learning based on getting high scores on exams took away her interest in reading because those activities made her think reading was a difficult task. In another reflection, she commented that it was not until after high school that she began reading on her own and saw that it could be a pleasurable experience.

Focussing too much on grammar was another potential joy killer. Offering her perspective as a former student, Carrie “didn’t like focusing on grammar and analyzing the structures of a text but … wanted to read something fun and enjoyable.” As a teacher, Erin “[felt] frustrated sometimes, because it is difficult to let students enjoy the reading itself and make chances to practice some important words or expressions they need to know simultaneously.” Thus, she senses a tension between giving students opportunities read for enjoyment and to practice the language they have to learn. It seems that in
Three other joy killer activities were talked about in reflections. The first was intensive reading with many unknown vocabulary or grammar expressions which “makes it incredibly difficult for them to understand the text at all. This can often cause a great deal of frustration within the students” (Jason). Secondly, too much focus on reading speed for fluency was also said to cause learners stress. Christy notes “there are disadvantages of reading faster. The pressure to go faster can be a source of stress. Such pressure can reduce the enjoyment that learners get from reading.” Lastly, Eunice pointed out that writing long and labor-intensive book reports can cause students to feel under pressure which can eliminate the pleasure from their reading experience.

The third major finding related to respondents’ beliefs about the prominent role of affect and emotions in EFL reading. This included their beliefs about the importance of teachers paying careful attention to student interest, motivation, enjoyment, and negative emotions in the reading classroom. They believed teachers’ consideration of learner emotions was vital because learners’ positive emotions were the impetus for them to do the large amount of reading necessary to improve their language abilities.

Surprisingly, little research has been conducted into teachers’ beliefs about the role of emotions in L2 reading instruction. In fact, Zembylas (2005) contends that “emotion is the least investigated aspect of research on teaching, yet it is probably the aspect most often mentioned as being important and deserving more attention” (p. 466). Of the EFL reading research, only Murtiningsih (2014) mentions in passing how high school teachers believe students have negative attitudes toward reading that might be improved by less formal teacher–student relationships.

Other extant research that most closely relates to teachers’ beliefs and students’ emotions centers on the notion of emotional scaffolding. Meyer and Turner (2007) define this as “temporary but reliable teacher-initiated interactions that support students’ positive emotional experiences to achieve a variety of classroom goals” (p. 244). Major findings have been that teachers’ instructional goals associated with emotional scaffolding are to
“sustain and enhance student understanding, motivation, collaboration, participation, and emotional well-being [with the ultimate aim of] increasing student achievement and autonomy” (Meyer & Turner, 2007, p. 244). Stuhlman and Pianta (2001) demonstrated the critical need to pay attention to this notion when they found that kindergarten students who had negative relationships with their teachers experienced adverse academic and social outcomes all the way through the fourth grade.

V. CONCLUSION

1. General Conclusions

Respondents discussed a number of biographical experiences related to their own time as students, living and studying abroad, and helping their family with English literacy that influenced their beliefs about teaching second-language reading. These findings appear to be the first to explore how these particular out-of-school experiences relate to teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the findings are in accord with previous research that teacher beliefs are influenced by both their own family (Murtiningsih, 2014) and educational experiences (Borg, 2006; Numrich, 1996) as well as their teacher education (Ertmer, 2005).

Participants also expressed a belief in the necessity of knowing the learner in order to plan differentiated lessons that meet their unique needs. Existent research with Korean EFL teachers tends to focus on beliefs about particular instructional methods (e.g., English only or use of translation) rather than beliefs about how to differentiate instruction for the learner. On the whole, Korean teachers tend to be somewhat ambivalent in their beliefs about the value of these methodological innovations (Choi, 2000; Jeon, 2006, 2008).

Limited research explores ESL or EFL teachers’ beliefs about reading instruction (Borg, 2006; El-Okda, 2005; Macalister, 2010). Most of the existing research reported disagreement about the importance of reading in the second/foreign language classroom with some teachers believing it was not important (Murtiningsih, 2014) and others believing it was (Macalister,
The act of reading itself was perceived by teachers in one study to be a bottom-up and text-centered process (Kuzborska, 2011). Some teachers believed in the benefits of oral reading aloud (El-Okda, 2005; Kuzborska, 2011) though there was not total agreement as to its value (Graden, 1996). Many felt that knowledge of all vocabulary in the reading text was vital for comprehension (El-Okda, 2005; Kuzborska, 2011; Murtiningsih, 2014). Others stressed the importance of teaching reading strategies (Bamanger & Gashan, 2014) though there were teachers who favored a traditional skills-based approach (Kuzborska, 2011). No studies in the foreign language context mentioned knowledge of the learner’s needs or the role of differentiation in L2 reading instruction although its importance has been highlighted in the second-language context (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001). However, we need to know more about these kinds of beliefs to have a more complete picture of teacher cognition overall. Finally, this research revealed respondents’ beliefs about the role of learners’ emotions in EFL reading as being fundamental on the grounds that taking learners’ feelings into account is necessary to motivate them to do the extensive reading required to enhance their language proficiency. Teacher cognition research has tended to focus on the teacher instead of the learner (McLean & Bullard, 2000) so less is known about emotions of the learner. Nevertheless, related findings gleaned from the current research literature reveal teacher beliefs that high-school students have negative attitudes (Murtiningsih, 2014) and that maintaining learner interest during reading lessons is desirable (El-Okda, 2005). Limited extant research into the role of emotion in teaching and learning shows that teachers’ value the use of emotional scaffolding to support and motivate learners acknowledging the profound impact that negative student–teacher relationships can have on later student achievement (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001).

2. Significance of the Research

The present study investigated EFL teachers’ beliefs about second language reading. Findings sheds some light on previously overlooked influences on beliefs like helping family members to develop their literacy.
skills. This research is also the first to address unique dimensions of teacher beliefs about learners’ needs and emotions in second language reading instruction. Identification and discussion of these themes helps expand our currently incomplete understanding of EFL teachers’ beliefs of reading instruction more generally and Korean EFL teachers’ beliefs in particular. These findings allow second and foreign language researchers and teacher educators to begin discussions in teacher education programs that push beginning teachers to reflect more deeply on how their beliefs align with contemporary research-based understandings of literacy and recommended best practices. Such discussions can help us better understand the complexity of the teaching and learning process.

3. Potential Limitations of the Research

There were some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, reflection data were not triangulated with interviews or observational data of the respondents’ teaching. This kind of data would have supported whether or not they actually behave in a way that is consistent with their stated beliefs. Unfortunately, many respondents were not currently teaching because they had taken a break to attend the course and research access could not be gained to the teaching sites of those who were. Future research should incorporate these data sources to corroborate respondents’ stated beliefs. Secondly, the data is all self-reported. Some of the main drawbacks of self-reported data are that it cannot be independently verified, it can be biased, inaccurate, exaggerated and self-serving. Attempts were made to counteract some of these drawbacks by using data from a large number of participants in the hope of eliciting a range of possible viewpoints and acknowledging multiple perspectives on any issue that appeared in the data. Finally, participants generally had a strong command of English and so they appeared to be able to communicate their views with relative ease. However, it should be acknowledged that they may have not been able to articulate their views in as nuanced a way as they would have if they had written their reflections in Korean or given the interview in their first language, Korean.
4. Implications and Further Research

Additional exploration of the impact of biographical influences on teachers’ beliefs about second language reading instruction may lead to an expanded conceptualization of potential influences on teacher beliefs to include a much wider scope of factors in their personal biographies that may impact their beliefs about teaching. This knowledge could then allow researchers to identify several previously unknown yet powerful out-of-school influences on their beliefs.

A refined understanding of teachers’ beliefs associated with learners and second language reading can enable teacher educators to more effectively guide pre-service teachers to reflect on the role of the learner in the literacy instructional process. Deep knowledge of relevant issues can also allow teacher educators to address misconceptions while avoiding pedantically telling teacher candidates what they already know. Additionally, understanding teachers’ beliefs about the role of emotions in second language reading instruction can make them more attuned to their students’ emotions. Thus, teachers can more quickly notice and intervene when a student experiences negative feelings in their classes.

Further research should explore the relationship between biographical and other non-classroom-based life experiences and teachers’ beliefs. This research can tell us more about the impact of out-of-school life experiences on teachers’ cognitions and how their thinking is then reflected in their classroom practice. Researchers should also examine teachers’ beliefs about learners’ emotions in order to better clarify the nature of those beliefs and tease out their potential relationship with other teacher cognitions and classroom behavior. Lastly, it would be useful to probe how closely teachers’ stated beliefs about understanding learners’ needs and emotions correspond to their classroom practices. The present study revealed that teachers’ expressed beliefs often correspond well with current “best practice” recommendations for second language literacy instruction. However, one wonders whether participants are simply repeating the recommendations they have heard and read about for best practices. Therefore, it would be informative to observe their classes to see how well these high-minded
statements actually parallel their actual practice in the sometime less-than-ideal conditions of their classrooms.

REFERENCES


Key words: teacher beliefs, foreign language reading, affect in reading instruction, teacher development

교사 신념, 외국어 독서, 독서지도, 교사 양성에 미치는 영향

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Received in January, 7, 2017
Reviewed in February, 3, 2017
Revised version received in February, 15, 2017

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