

**DOING CRITICAL LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN NEOLIBERAL SPACES:  
A MATERIALIST NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHING YOUNG  
LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN A KOREAN HAGWON**

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**ABSTRACT**

Critical language pedagogy has been practiced in many contexts, but there have been few reports of critical pedagogy being practiced in neoliberal spaces of private language education. In this paper, I document critical English language teaching initiatives using the specific case of a South Korean English private language school (hagwon) to demonstrate the possibilities of such an approach in a private institution. Using a critical practitioner research perspective (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), I collected data from my classes at a hagwon over a 15-month period in the form of artifacts (ballots, student surveys, etc.), images, and student writings. I use emplotment (Polkinghorne, 1995) as a means of creating a narrative from non-narrative data and a materialist analysis (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008) to examine the data. Student resistance, negotiating syllabi, and learner-created materials, and critical episodes in three classes, illustrate the possibilities, need for, and limitations of critical pedagogy in neoliberal spaces.

**INTRODUCTION**

Critical pedagogy is practiced and has been reported on in numerous countries, cultures, and contexts. This paper expands that literature by arguing for the possibilities of, and need for critical pedagogy in private English language education schools, called hagwons<sup>1</sup>, in South Korea<sup>2</sup>. In this case, I found that critical pedagogy is possible through the opening of small

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<sup>1</sup> 학원 often transliterates as hagwon. It has been adopted in the English of expatriates living in Korea. For this reason I will not italicize it, and I will pluralize it as “hagwons” in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth I will use simply “Korea” to refer to South Korea as the scope of this paper is limited to South Korea.

spaces in the curriculum, through building strong relationships with students, and through gaining the support of administration. This paper presents the ways in which I was able to create those spaces. Some critical education scholars (i.e., Lipman, 2009) have warned teachers against any sort of engagement with private education, on the basis that this could potentially legitimize private education at the expense of supporting and improving state-sponsored education. In contrast, I show in this paper that engagement with students in private language education is not only important, but necessary. In Korea private English language education has simply become too large a sector to ignore or pursue policies of disengagement with.

Secondary aims of this paper are to add to the growing literature on doing critical pedagogy with young(er) learners, to describe the context of English language education in hagwons, to identify and argue for a research methodology appropriate for critical pedagogy with young(er) learners contexts where critical pedagogy may not be openly welcomed, and finally to illuminate specific steps to beginning a practice of critical pedagogy for other English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers who are committed to social justice so that they might pursue their own critical pedagogies. My own narrative of development as a critical teacher is central to achieving these aims.

I use narrative analysis (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995) to analyze data I collected as a teacher-researcher drawing on ideas from critical practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) over a 15-month period (March 2011 – May 2012). The data collected, including student artifacts (ballots, pictures drawn, etc.), images of student resistance, and student written work, is not narrative in nature; that is to say, the individual data do not tell a story on their own. I use emplotment, a means for bringing together non-narrative data into a cohesive narrative as a process of meaning making (Polkinghorne, 1995), to tell of my evolving critical pedagogy. I further make sense of the data and their relation to a narrative of critical pedagogy using a materialist analysis (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) embedded in the narrative to examine the objects collected and their relation to the production of knowledge in the classroom.

In the remainder of this section, I will locate myself in this study and explain my position and trajectory in order for readers to understand why and how I came to be a critical pedagogue in a Korean hagwon and in order to understand the questions I raise and attempt to answer in this

paper. Also, as a work of critical research, in which all knowledge and production of knowledge is assumed to be political, it is important to clarify my political position at the beginning.

Politically, my family has been involved in Republican Party politics in the Midwest of the United States for many years. I became politically active and aware in high school when our school district voted to split and there was a battle for which classes and teachers would be retained, and which would be cut. They had decided to cut the German language program, and being a student in German, I decided to fight this decision with my friends. We gathered signatures, and I organized students to show up at the next school board meeting for support while I presented the signatures and spoke at the meeting. I also wrote editorials in the town newspapers and even received a call from a supporter of the split who was angry with my activism. The German program was not cut in the end, and both of my younger sisters were able to learn German.

At university, I was involved with several activist and political organizations. My wariness of political leaders and my understanding that they could and should be challenged increased. My involvement in political movements came in response to local fights for union rights at my undergraduate university, and in response to larger political disagreements with the Bush administration. I co-facilitated a reading circle on anarchist theory with Experimental College and organized with the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC). I also participated with PPEHRC's "Bushville" (a camp of homeless and impoverished people suffering from Bush era policies, similar to the Hoovervilles of the 1930s) and a protest march on the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Before I left for Korea, a friend, took me to a local, radical bookstore in Minneapolis to buy *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (2000, first published 1968 in Portuguese). I did not take the time to read it before I left, but would turn to it after about six months of teaching.

I went to Korea lacking training or background in either education or language teaching. During my first six months, I relied on the limited training given to us by ULS, as well as my own "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). My teaching style was teacher-centered and authoritarian. My fear of losing control of the students, and having to ask for assistance or worse, lose creditability as a teacher in the eyes of my students, was especially powerful in leading me to adopt an authoritarian style where the goal was to maintain absolute control of the class at all times. At the time, I was teaching kindergarten and early elementary school students but had

limited experience with children and absolutely no experience with groups of small children. I had been told by other teachers (and later again by teacher trainers on a CELTA<sup>3</sup> course which I completed in Seoul in 2011) not to smile at the students during the first few months, or the students would think I was weak. I had been told by the administration on the other hand to smile and hug the children who came late. This was because closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras were in each classroom and broadcast live to the lobby of the school on big screen TV monitors where parents could watch. Late children would be brought by parents who would inevitably be watching CCTV as they dropped off their children. Our other imperative with the CCTV was to make sure that the class looked like a ‘proper’ class, with students all sitting with their books open, apt pupils for a teacher at the front of the room delivering them knowledge of the English language.

After my initial six-month period of adjusting and simply surviving classes, the contradiction between my authoritarian teaching style and my personal politics (in which I abhorred oppression of any sort), began to tug at me more and more. My radical orientation, shaped by my experience and involvement with activist groups, was also challenged by the contradiction that I began to feel as a teacher in Korea, in an elite private language institute, teaching privileged students. I turned to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and trying to figure out how to apply Freire’s ideas to my own class led to Mary Cowhey’s *Black Ants and Buddhists* (2005), about the author’s experience using critical pedagogy with children. I was then able to begin to piece together a way to teach that was consistent with my personal values, which I will elaborate more in the next section.

Although I was unprepared to be a teacher, this rough start was important to my development as a critical language teacher for three reasons. First, I was able to develop close relationships with my Korean coworkers, whom I identified as experts whose opinions and advices I valued. Being in an EFL environment, away from everyone I knew, helped me form fast and strong personal relationships with both my Korean and foreign coworkers, who were besides being coworkers, also my only social contacts. Without these strong relationships, the space for critical pedagogy would have never been opened for me in the way that it was. Second, my radical

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<sup>3</sup> CELTA is a four-week intensive pre-service teacher training course for those who will be teaching ESL/EFL to adults administered in different venues and countries around the world by Cambridge University. I took it, however during my second year teaching, in 2011 as a part-time eight-week course adapted for in-service teachers.

worldview and critical convictions were set before I became a teacher and, tortured as they were by my capitalist bonds of debt and neoliberal workplace, they drove my shift to critical pedagogy. Finally, these circumstances allowed me to accidentally discover possibilities for critical work under even what may seem the most impossible circumstances.

My hope is that, all together, this research will provide a guide of sorts for other teachers in hagwons who may wish to practice critical pedagogy. There are tens of thousands of English teachers in hagwons in Korea. It seems possible that there are at least some who feel the need to adopt a practice that matches their own personal moral and political convictions. By bridging the gap between personal and professional values, rather than keeping them separate, we can develop stronger teachers and know that they will work for a more just system.

## **KEY CONCEPTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE HAGWON CONTEXT**

### ***Introduction***

In this section, I outline key concepts of critical pedagogy that are relevant to its development in hagwons. I review the literature of critical pedagogy in other contexts that are relevant to hagwons, including as it has been done in Asia and Korea specifically, as it has been done working with children, working with privileged students, and working in private educational spaces (as opposed to public education). The review of this literature will help to identify gaps in the literature, namely reports of critical pedagogy in Korea with children and in neoliberal spaces, which this paper seeks to fill. Then, I describe critical pedagogy in relation to resistance. Student resistance was a major factor contributing to my adoption of critical pedagogy in teaching, and this literature helps make clear the need for and role of critical pedagogy in resistance to unjust situations. Students resisted on three levels in my classes: at the micro level of my classroom, at the meso level against hagwon policies, and at the macro level against the educational system in Korea.

### ***Defining Critical Pedagogy***

Drawing loosely on Freire (2000), I define critical pedagogy as a form of “problem-posing,” dialogic pedagogy in which students and teachers are co-investigators with the goal of action

toward liberation. The class should be learner-directed with materials developed by learners, but most importantly it must be locally situated. In this sense critical pedagogy might look different from one class to another because it must be responsive to and shaped by problems posed by the learners in each class. Being responsive to learners does not preclude the teacher from consciousness-raising efforts, however, since teaching is always a political act with neutrality being impossible. Freire (2000) does not expect teachers and students to be or become mutually equal, nor does he advocate what he calls “laissez-faire” teaching in which the teacher offers no guidance to the class and does not take part in decision making. Teachers have many roles to play in the classroom as critical pedagogues, and this can include the judicious exercise of legitimate authority (Wallace, 2001).

Critical pedagogy is often described in opposition to a “banking” (Freire, 2000) style of teaching. Banking, for Freire (2000), is used as an analogy to highlight a still pervasive conception of teaching as the teacher depositing knowledge in the otherwise empty minds of the pupils. In this analogy the teacher is the giver of knowledge, which reinforces the absolute authority of the teacher in relation to the students.

As an untrained teacher drawing on my past experiences as a student and desperate to maintain control led me to initially use a banking style of teaching. Our kindergarten classes were especially challenging, consisting of 80-minute blocks of class time, back-to-back, with only a 10-minute play period for students between the two 80-minute periods. Simply maintaining control of the classroom in that environment was challenging for a first-year teacher. The little training we did receive reinforced a teacher-centered, banking style class environment that fed off a tightly regulated, pre-made curriculum and lesson plans produced by the school and the corporation of which the school was a franchise. The standard of teacher-fronted classrooms in Korea has been noted elsewhere (Gerken, 2006; Kwon, 2004). This was not always the case, however.

Historically, at least at the policy level, Korean education has shared principles of progressive educational practice. Kwon (2004) notes that the kindergarten system in Korea, founded in the 1930s by the Japanese during colonial occupation, was initially influenced by progressive approaches being advocated by John Dewey. At the current policy level, both kindergarten language education and elementary school English education have been influenced by Western theories and ideas (Kang, 2012; Kwon, 2004). Since the 6<sup>th</sup> National English

Curriculum in 1995 and continuing until now through the 7<sup>th</sup> Revised National English Curriculum, student-centered teaching with an emphasis on communicative competence has been at the core of education policy (Kang, 2012). Part of the reason the Korean government recruits foreign teachers<sup>4</sup> is to foster cultural exchange and help Korean teachers learn communicative and student-centered methodologies (Jeon, 2009). The observed reality in classrooms has not matched this, however (Kwon, 2004). The fact that English education is measured by the Ministry of Education in terms of hours in the classroom, words taught, and sentence length (in numbers of words) (Kang, 2012) is indicative of the underlying view of language learning as discrete items rather than a communicative system.

Nonetheless, critical pedagogy has a growing presence in Asia in general and Korea specifically. A number of reports have detailed critical practices in Asia (Crookes, 2013; Devince, 2012; Eberhardinger, 2011). Further reports have detailed the practice of critical pedagogy in English language teaching (ELT) in Korea (Kang, 2009; Shin & Crookes, 2005a/b; Sung & Pederson, 2013). These studies help refute claims, often rooted in Orientalist essentializations of an imagined Confucian culture, that critical pedagogy is not possible in Asian or Korean contexts because the social hierarchies are too rigid and students too meek and compliant. Critical pedagogy has grown to such an extent in Korea now that the Korean Association of Teachers of English (KATE), one of the largest academic communities of TESOL scholars in Korea, has a special interest section devoted just to critical pedagogy, including running special mini-conferences, and sections of KATE's annual international conference with a focus solely on critical pedagogy in Korea<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Contexts of Critical Pedagogy***

Freire (2000) developed his critical pedagogy as a direct response to the context in provincial Brazil where he was working to develop first language (L1) literacy for an adult population of peasants and urban poor in the 1960s. Given this origin, it makes sense that as the idea of critical pedagogy has traveled to different contexts, it has changed and adapted to fit the needs of those

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<sup>4</sup> Foreign English teacher visas (E-2) are issued only to individuals from countries officially deemed "native English speaking" by the Korean government, including: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. See: [www.hikorea.go.kr/pt/InfoDetailR\\_en.pt?categoryId=2](http://www.hikorea.go.kr/pt/InfoDetailR_en.pt?categoryId=2)

<sup>5</sup> See website: <http://www.kate.or.kr/KateNews/view.asp?SqeID=275>

contexts. In this section, I will outline several contexts in which critical pedagogy has been practiced to show how my own practice was influenced by my specific context at ULS.

I found Cowhey's (2005) *Black Ants and Buddhists* while searching online for how to do critical pedagogy with children. This book, although written for a mixed L1/L2 classroom in a US public elementary school context, was invaluable for helping me to realize possibilities for doing critical pedagogy with younger learners. There are numerous other reports on critical pedagogy being used in young learner, elementary, or adolescent contexts (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Cowhey, 2005; Haneda, 2009; Lau, 2013; Quintero, 2007; Wallace, 1986). Of these, though, Cowhey (2005) gives the fullest and most detailed accounting of how critical pedagogy might work in an elementary school context. Her classes were mixed with ESL and non-ESL students. She writes that she teaches critically because "young children are capable of amazing things, far more than what is usually expected of them" (Cowhey, 2005, p. 18). This was my inspiration for bringing critical pedagogy into my own teaching with students from a kindergarten level to elementary and middle school.

Unlike many of Cowhey's students, though, my students at ULS were mainly upper middle class and privileged (although some were less privileged with parents paying large percentages of their monthly earnings for their child's private English language education). Vandrick is one of the few scholars who has written about the need for and complexities of doing critical pedagogy with privileged students when it is traditionally thought of as a tool of the less privileged to fight injustice (Vandrick, 1995; 2009). Vandrick writes from a university perspective in which her international students largely come from wealthy backgrounds in their home countries, which gives them the resources to pursue degrees from American institutions that will further solidify their place atop social hierarchies when they return. She writes though of the need for students (and teachers) to investigate their own privilege, and of that being one of the key goals for doing critical pedagogy with privileged groups of learners (Vandrick, 2009). In these sorts of settings, it is also important to remember that there are multiple sites of oppression, beyond economic, that critical pedagogy can address as well. Crookes (2013) brings together examples of critical pedagogy in different domains, including: feminist, anti-racist, sexual identity, environmental, and peace education. These are all also valid directions that a critical pedagogy can (and should) take that are possible even with economically privileged students. My own work with students, though, implemented critical pedagogy with privileged students



differently by following Freire's imperative to address the problems that the students themselves pose, as I will detail in later sections.

Across all the contexts and settings in which critical pedagogy has been described, there are few reports of critical pedagogy being done in the private sector. The closest is Chun (2009) who gives a report of doing critical pedagogy in an intensive English program (IEP). He characterizes the IEP he taught in, attached to a university but for non-matriculated students, as a discursively constructed neoliberal space. The neoliberal construction of this space is done through the marketization of English as a sellable good to perspective students, and the reinforcing of neoliberal concepts of personhood and citizenship as promoted through the learning materials (textbooks) used in the IEP (Chun, 2009). Chun (2009) reports on his critical interventions to disrupt those discourses. He characterizes his work as helping students in small ways to be able to critique neoliberal discourses around them in both academic and public lives, which he hopes will eventually lead to broader societal changes.

This neoliberal context that Chun (2009) reports on will be of especial importance in describing the context of doing critical pedagogy at ULS, where the three defining factors of the context were working with young learners, working with economically privileged students, and working within a private, profit-driven school. All these facets influenced the types of critical pedagogy that were possible.

### ***Resistance and Critical Pedagogy***

While I had personal misgivings about practicing a banking style of education, it was the resistance of my students to my teaching and their learning context in general that gave me the push I needed to explore alternate pedagogies. In this section I will discuss the resistance of students to my teaching and to private English language education generally and how that factored into my shift to critical pedagogy.

Student resistance to learning or to teachers has been well theorized, but under documented in empirical studies (Kanpol, 1997). Those that have documented resistance have found it for a variety of reasons. Students resist the representation in textbooks of language and language users (Canagarajah, 1993), they resist teachers whom they view as illegitimate (Stanley, 2013), or they might resist out of disinterest or boredom (Jeon, 2009). In one study done in China, Stanley (2013) relates resistance from students to pressure on the teachers to be fun in classes, above all

other requirements. Much the same can be said of Korea, where foreign teachers are in a similar position of teaching primarily conversation classes meant to activate language that has been taught in the students' other (i.e., grammar) classes with Korean teachers.

Student resistance is normalized and rationalized teachers in these various studies through discourses of misbehavior. In the eyes of the teachers, student resistance is simply "bad" behavior. The difference between "bad" behavior and resistance is more than semantic. The use of one term over the other belies adherence to ideologies or beliefs. The behavior narrative refuses to grant legitimate reason to act and thereby limits the agency of the actor. Recognizing these acts as resistance, however, legitimizes the acts and acknowledges that they are a reasoned response to what has been seen by the actor as injustice. In a study of a class at a U.S. high school, Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) developed the framework of "script and counterscript" to explain as student resistance what teachers were describing as "bad" behavior in classrooms. Their study showed a teacher maintaining control of the learning in his teacher-centered class by controlling the discussion, or script. When students refused to follow the script (i.e., mocking, going off topic, giving purposefully wrong answers) they were creating their own "counterscripts" in resistance to the unidirectional flow of discussion and narrow legitimation of knowledge in the classroom. This framework casts the students who are participating in such counterscripts not as deviants or "bad" students, but rather as students who are combatting the silencing of their knowledge and participation.

Students are quick to notice injustice. In the context of hagwons, where they are bodily confined to learn English, they may see injustice in that English is something for which they may see little practical use in an EFL context. They are also learning in hagwons from teachers they may not see as legitimate (especially those without qualifications, cf. Kobayashi, 2014). Students are creative with resistance tactics. Other studies have looked specifically at resistance to "native English speaking" teachers in EFL contexts (Jeon, 2009; Stanley, 2013). Some of the acts of resistance that those studies categorized, documented, and defined as resistance include: sleeping in class, using cellphones, looking in mirrors, throwing things, spitting, vandalism, not bringing materials, reading newspapers in class, and speaking in their first language (L1) rather than English (Jeon, 2009; Stanley, 2013). Many of these I noticed in my own classes as well. While resistance was discussed in Jeon (2009) and Stanley's (2013) work, it was not the focus of either study. In both studies the acts of resistance are documented in laundry list fashion without deeper

consideration as to the motivations or goals for each specific action, and also without representing the student view of such resistance.

Scott (1985) takes a broader perspective on resistance, contesting the traditional bourgeois, Western ideal of resistance (selfless, principled, organized, revolutionary, and negating domination), and expands the definition to include non-idealist, anarchistic forms of resistance that have been written off as “bad” behavior (individualistic, opportunistic, without larger consequences, and without building to some larger revolutionary action) in colonial discourses. While this is similar to the framework of script and counterscript (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995), it goes beyond discourse and also takes into account other acts that students may commit as resistance in the classroom (i.e., vandalism, graffiti, purposefully not doing homework, etc.). This is important in understanding the instances of student resistance that I share as true resistance, not just the result of poor behavior or attitudes or laziness on the part of students.

These acts of resistance might be termed “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) in that they are being used to subvert teacher control of classroom discourses. Scott’s (1985, 1990) ethnography of a seemingly passive Malaysian village brought to light many of the tactics used in everyday resistance by impoverished village residents to challenge the hegemonic discourses of the wealthy. An examination of theft, sabotage, avoidance, gossip (i.e., name calling, blaming, malicious rumor spreading), lying, and boycotting brought out the systematic and purposefully subversive nature of the acts when other means of resistance (i.e., armed revolution) were not available (Scott, 1985). These acts, along with the discourse of passivity, paralleled what I was witnessing in my own classes as opposed to what I was told to expect, and which I will detail further in a later section. The students were not passive.

In EFL contexts, student resistance can have negative impacts on relationships and intercultural understanding between students and teachers. Others have found resistance (legitimate or not) when it is not perceived as legitimate, to lead to Othering (Orientalist and Occidental) discourses (Jeon, 2009; Stanley, 2013). Foreign teacher narratives of student resistance and the reasons they construct for the resistance can contribute to an infantilizing of Asian students who are perceived as immature, in contrast to an imagined image of Western students (Stanley, 2013).

Critical pedagogy, which I turned to in the face of this resistance, welcomes resistance. Students are encouraged to question power and not accept it uncritically, in effect encouraging

them to resist (Hardin, 2001). Critical pedagogy simultaneously fosters their power and participation in co-constructing the class and posing problems that the class centers on. By legitimizing students' concerns and resistance, the teacher becomes a participant in resistance to larger problems addressed in the class rather than becoming a target. In this way, Othering discourses can be overcome, and class becomes a humanizing experience for all participants.

Before I go into detail on my practice, though, it is necessary to explain the broader context of education and neoliberalism in Korea, which was ultimately the cause of much of the student resistance. This will also help to show ways in which neoliberalism might be contested, and alternative possibilities imagined through critical pedagogy in oppressive contexts.

### *Neoliberalism and Korean Education*

It is important to understand the context of neoliberalism in English education in Korea in terms of resistance. At ULS, for example, teachers were often resisting administrative policies, and students were often resisting teacher policies. To understand the broader political economic context of neoliberal English education policy is to understand where these policies are coming from and what alternatives might be imagined through critical pedagogy.

***Defining neoliberalism.*** Neoliberalism is defined most simply by Harvey as the “financialization of everything” (2005, p. 33). This is further elaborated by Weiner (2005), who identifies five principles of neoliberalism: uncritically accepting markets, a concentration of wealth and power, deregulation of industry, privatization of services that were once provided by government and an emphasis on individualism over social responsibility. This can be expressed in part by the rise in primacy of private property rights over commonly-held property or community spaces (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism is not something that occurred naturally as a product of some notion of “progress,” but was instead carefully guided along until it became economic reality and the paradigm in which we now operate. Neoliberalism is associated with the ideal of freedom. Conservative public figures of neoliberalism in the U.S. and Europe and their theorists and precursors (i.e., Milton Friedman, Alan Greenspan, Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, etc.) tie it to ideas like deregulation (freedom from government interference in business), privatization (free enterprise), and individualism (freedom from responsibility and bootstrap ideology – “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”) (Harvey, 2005).

In education, neoliberalism has had an enormous impact. Harvey (2005) says that a key to neoliberalism in privatizing is that where there are no markets, the state must create them. In the U.S., examples of this can be seen in the creation of charter schools, which are free from the regulations imposed on public schools, and compete with public schools for funding. It can also be seen in school choice programs and voucher programs in which public schools are put into competition with private schools and each other. The key characteristics of neoliberalism that apply specifically to English language education in Korea are: privatization of learning, marketization and competition between schools, huge pay differentials between managers and workers (administration and teachers) with a lack of democratic process in the workplace, competition between workers, casualization of workers, attacks on unions, and a general shift in language to “manager speak” (i.e., students referred to as “customers”) (Hill, 2012). I will discuss further the privatization of English language learning since that is the context in which hagwons exist.

***Privatization of English language education in Korea.*** The privatization of learning can most obviously be applied to the system of private institutes in Korea known as hagwons, and also referred to as a system of “shadow education” (Byun & Kim, 2010, p. 165). Hagwons are typically after school programs which specialize in test preparation, math, science, and English among other subjects.

English language hagwons (after-school programs and kindergartens) have proliferated exponentially as a result of neoliberal policy changes introduced in the late-1990s (Byun & Kim, 2010; Jeon, 2009; Lee, 2011; Park, 2010). Moon (2009) shows the number of hagwons increasing from 1,421 in 1970 to 70,213 in 2008. In 2007, the industry employed more than 180,000 tutors (Lee, 2011). Parents spent 34.8 billion dollars for supplemental private education in 2010 (Lee, 2011) and more than \$10 billion on private English language education alone in 2006 (Koo, 2007). A large percentage, 8 out of 10 students (including 9 of 10 students from families making \$6,300/month or higher, but only 4 of 10 students from families earning less than \$900/month), attend hagwons for various subjects including math, science and English (Byun & Kim, 2010, p. 165). The overall percentage of students participating in hagwon education rose from 15% in 1980, to 54% in 1997, and 72.6% in 2002 (Yang, 2003 cited in Park, 2007, p. 102) before rising to 80% in Byun & Kim’s 2010 study.

The expansion of the English language market can also be seen in increasing numbers of foreign teachers employed in Korea. The number of foreign EFL teachers working in Korea increased 73% from 6,414 in 2000 to 23,600 in 2010 (KIS, 2011). This number accounts for 53% of all expatriates from English speaking countries living in Korea, including the US military population (Song, 2012). Only 3,477 were employed by public schools (EPIK, 2012). This leaves the vast majority of foreign EFL teachers in Korea employed by hagwons.

Privatized English language teaching is symptomatic of the shift in Korea to viewing language teaching as a product. This “product” can be produced, controlled, distributed, valued, and constrained by the private market (Heller, 2010). Seeing language teaching as a product is, for Heller, part of the larger commodification of language and identities; language has played a central role in neoliberal economics through capitalist expansion, computerization and other sectors of economic growth (Heller, 2003, 2010). The control of language learning and ELT by the private market means that distribution is unequal while the value of English language learning is driven up.

This system not only has economic impacts, but a severe negative human impact. Beyond furthering class inequalities, several other problems have been attributed to the current neoliberal Korean education model. Korean high school students are shown to sleep only an average of four hours/night while attending class for up to 11 hours/day (Blazer, 2012). The negative effects of limited sleep because of hagwon education have been linked to weight gain (Do, 2014), high rates of depression (Lee & Larson, 2000) and higher suicide rates (Kang et al., 2014). These studies on the health effects of hagwons have all called sharply into question the value of this additional private education when it physically brings harm to students.

***Contesting neoliberalism.*** This neoliberal transformation in Korean English language education has not happened without resistance. There has been a strong critique of neoliberal policies in general from Korean academics, both from inside and outside Korea (i.e., Song, 2010). Two aspects of neoliberal education ideology in particular have been identified and critiqued.

First there is the neoliberal concept of personhood, that is, a person is responsible for her/himself and her/his own advancement (Harvey, 2005). Abelmann, Park, and Kim (2009) both acknowledge the problem that students in Korea have internalized a “neoliberal personhood” that accepts the burden of self-development through education, rather than challenging the underlying values that create a strong hierarchy in the Korean education system. This ideology of self-

advancement through education can be seen in the hagwon system, where financial means allow individuals to advance. As mentioned above, there has been sharp criticism of the human cost to the proliferation of hagwons (Do, 2014; Lee & Larson, 2000; Kang et al., 2014). Evidence of bodily harm to students as a result of prolonged study though has yet to result in any major challenges or changes to the hagwon system beyond a 10 p.m. curfew being imposed in 2010 (Choi, 2013). Other interventions made by the government have all followed neoliberal doctrine of allowing competition between schools (and hagwons) in the free market (Lee, 2011).

English language policies as promoted by neoliberal educational policies have also not gone unchallenged. One example of this is a recent issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* was dedicated to studies by Korean scholars which challenged neoliberal notions of linguistic capital (Park & Lo, 2012). In particular, Jeon (2012) looks at how the government sponsored Teach and Learn in Korea (TaLK) program is managed in such a way as to reify a monolingual ideology that promotes English language hegemony and limits the identities that participants are able to adopt and experiences they are able to have. She notes how ultimately, the program fails to achieve its goal of bridging the class divide between rural and urban Korea because neoliberal policies are unchallenged (Jeon, 2012).

Arguments have also been made against the influx of ‘native speaking’ English teachers in other programs beyond TaLK (both publicly and privately run). Specifically, there have been critiques of untrained, inexperienced teachers who are not required to have the same level of qualifications that Korean teachers of English are required to have (Wang & Lin, 2013). This contributes to a deprofessionalizing of TESOL as a field by privileging especially young, white, male NESTs with no professional background (Kobayashi, 2014; Wang & Lin, 2013). By having strong hiring preferences for white male NESTs, besides maintaining a discriminatory system, standards for teacher qualifications are dropped and the profession of teaching English suffers as a whole from a public loss of faith or belief in English teachers as professionals (Kobayashi, 2014).

All of these studies, and others like them (i.e., Park, 2011), show a recent concentrated critique from academics of neoliberal language policies that promote English. There has not been much of a change to neoliberal policies as a response to these studies, however. Gray (2008) has documented the declining power of the once-strong labor unions in Korea to effectively combat

neoliberalism and the entrenched nature of neoliberalism in Korea. The entrenchment of neoliberal policies in education and language seems to be equally as difficult to disrupt at present.

The more practical question of exactly how a critical pedagogue can bring these struggles against neoliberal policies down to the level of the classroom, especially in a hagwon setting, motivates this study and leads to my research questions.

### ***Research Questions***

The first and overarching question for all critical work is: “How can I, through this work, combat injustice and make the world (or at least my local context) a better place?” My specific questions, coming out of this overarching question in relation to the context in which Korean hagwons exist and the possibilities for critical pedagogy, are:

1. Is critical pedagogy possible in privatized (neoliberal) spaces of English language education in South Korea? If so, how?
2. If critical pedagogy is possible in privatized English language educational spaces, is it desirable?

An additional question arose as I was carrying out this study:

3. What does a critical research methodology look like for a teacher in this context?

In the next section, I will discuss how this question and how I sought to find an appropriate methodology.

## **SITE, DATA, AND TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE METHODOLOGY**

### ***Introduction***

In this section, I will first describe the hagwon in which this study takes place, Universal Language School, and the specific classes that this study focuses on. I give a thick description of the hagwon because published reports of hagwons as contexts of English teaching and learning have been rare (Hendricks, 2005 does discuss hagwons, but takes many stances in the description that tend to essentialize Korean culture as an Other distinct from Western culture). It is important to understand the meso level context of the hagwon in order to better understand the conditions in which critical pedagogy can arise. Also in giving the thick description of ULS, three of the key themes I hope to draw attention to in these descriptions are that the relationships and rapport



I established with classes extended far beyond the immediate classroom, the curriculum was for the most part flexible, and the classes and curriculum were always in flux.

### *Universal Language School*

Universal Language School is a large private language institute in Seoul. At the time of the study, there were over 1000 students. The exact number varied, but the total student population did not drop below 1000 while I was working there. At the time I worked there the hagwon employed 19 foreign teachers from the U.S. (10), Canada (8), and the United Kingdom (1), 22 Korean teachers, and 31 to 38 support staff (teaching aides, bus drivers, cooks, administrative support staff, etc., whose exact number was always in flux).

Classes at ULS were assigned at the end of February for the school year (March – February). Teachers typically remained teaching the same classes for the entire year, unless enrollment changed. Class sizes were capped at 12 students, meaning that teachers had an excellent opportunity to develop close rapport with students. Over my time at the school, I was able to teach multiple siblings from the same family, loop up with groups of students (teaching them in kindergarten and second grade or first and third grade), and get to know their families outside of ULS. This level of trust and community allowed me to do things that might not have been possible in other settings.

Table 1  
*Description of Classes Used for Data Collection*

Class	Age of students	Number of Students	Curriculum
Honors AP 2	9	5 – 6	ULS & Piloting new books
NEK class 1 & 2	10 – 12	11 – 18	ULS
Middle B/A	14 – 15	9 – 12	Novels/No set curriculum
Middle C	14 – 15	6 – 10	Novels/No set curriculum
Middle H	14 – 15	6 – 7	No set curriculum
Pre-Middle	13	8 – 12	Non-ULS textbooks

In this paper, I will be sharing data and stories from eight classes (see Table 1) that illustrate my evolution as a critical teacher and the possibility and need for critical pedagogy in the neoliberal space of ULS. As can be seen in the table, during the year the number students in each class fluctuated, highlighting the fluid nature of student movement into and out of hagwons. I

will describe each class and the core group of students and main time period that I focus on in each for data collection.

Two of the classes were non-AP elementary classes. They started as one class in March 2011 and as enrollment changed and students progressed, they split into two classes by the time I stopped teaching the classes in March 2012. Students in the class were mixed third, fourth, and fifth grades. They began in the lowest level placement, and I was the first foreign teacher any of them had. There were twelve students in the original class together for three months. Two left and one more joined at that time, and a central group of eleven were in the class for nine months before they split into two classes, both of which had additional students join. My data are collected from the first nine months when they were all in one class.

The students were enrolled in a program called New English Kids (NEK). This program used textbooks produced by the franchising company of ULS. The curriculum for my class was supposed to be communicative language teaching based around the given textbooks, covering a certain number of pages per class. The amount of material covered was determined by the head teacher of the program working with higher level administrators.

I will also draw data from four middle school classes. Middle school was the most unstable of all the programs at ULS, in terms of enrollment, curriculum and administration. There were five different administrators for the middle school program from 2009 – 2012, which included a three-month period from March – May 2012 in which there was no administrator or curriculum.

From March 2011 to February 2012, the middle school director decided to have foreign teachers focus on a curriculum that combined reading, writing, and presentations. Classes were given novels and a guided journal as materials. The novels for my classes (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series for lower level, and *Indian in the Cupboard* series for intermediate level) were far beyond the linguistic level of my students and caused a great deal of frustration. This loose curriculum was also challenging for many of the other teachers in the middle school program who were used to working with a tightly controlled curriculum and unsure of how to scaffold such difficult materials.

This background is important because not only did one of my own pivotal moments come out of this frustration, but I also got to know many of the students who would form the classes I collected data from during this period. The middle school classes I focus on most in this paper are a MWF Middle A class (the second highest middle school level at the school), and a TTh

Middle H class. The classes are somewhat intertwined. Many of the students who initially started with me in Middle B leveled up at to Middle A, where I continued to teach them. Likewise, some of the Middle A students leveled up to Middle H (or were forced to change classes because of MWF or TTh schedule conflicts), where I was also the teacher. Across these classes, I taught many of the students for more than a year and so was able to build rapport with them.

I also draw a bit of data from a Middle C and pre-Middle class. These classes were lower level classes and the enrollment of these classes changed the most over the time that I taught them. Since I was unable to establish a strong rapport with the students in these classes, they were some of the most challenging to teach. For these reasons, I use only a few examples from each class in section three when discussing resistance.

The final class that I draw data from is my honors AP2 class. This was a second grade class that had gone through the kindergarten program for three years, and had begun in the AP program in first grade and were now second graders. This class had six students, but throughout most of the data collection in 2011 – 2012, there were only five students, as the sixth took many months off from attending ULS. I had taught or tutored three out of the five students previously for up to six months, and also taught siblings of two of the students at the same time, and so had already established good rapport with the students before becoming their AP2 teacher.

The AP program is one of the flagship programs at ULS, but it has a looser and more shifting curriculum than many other programs. New textbooks are often piloted along with new programs and classes in addition to the more established ULS produced curriculum. I taught this class four days/week. On Wednesday and Friday, we covered writing. On Tuesday and Thursday, we covered reading, including an extensive reading component (this one with books that were leveled to match the linguistic levels of the students).

Teaching the same small group of students in each class for the duration of a year (or more in some cases where students were in my other classes as well), I was able to get to know the students in these classes very well and establish a strong rapport with them. Over the course of several years, I got to know many of the parents (to varying extents) and siblings of the students as well, and spend time with many of the students in settings outside of the classroom when we had special events such as parties for the holidays, field trips, ULS-wide event days, and intensive English camp classes during summer and winter seasons when public schools were on vacation. My rapport with students and the fluctuating nature of the curriculum, and continual

renewal of classes (level testing every three months providing a natural point to begin new projects or curriculum) that was always changing, provided for openings that I could use to do critical pedagogy and gain the trust of the students to actually do it in a meaningful way.

### ***Methodology***

This paper and the data gathered are a result of classroom research over a one-year period. As my teaching evolved, so also did my understanding and practices of classroom research, although my goal of figuring out how to practice critical pedagogy remained constant. At the time of this project, I was working full-time as a teacher at ULS and was therefore without the support or resources offered by a university setting. Also as a result of the longitudinal, evolving nature of this inquiry, several methods of data collection were used. Taken altogether, I term this methodology *critical practitioner research* (West & Crookes, 2017). In this section, I will describe my methodological evolution, define the need for an appropriate critical research methodology in hagwons (and other neoliberal or potentially difficult or hostile settings), and use it to theorize critical practitioner research, then I list the data collected from each class in the study.

***Defining critical practitioner research.*** Practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) focuses on the practitioner as knowledge producer. It is a useful concept for theorizing a critical method of inquiry specific to educational research that blends more explicitly pedagogy and research. The concept of practitioner acknowledges the fact that teachers are not the only educational workers engaged in educational inquiry of events that take place in schools and classrooms. Administrators, parents, activists, and others can also be considered practitioners. Practitioner research is multi-method and can include reflective practice, narrative inquiry, and other forms of research. It was also explicitly conceived of to challenge traditional university research and knowledge production. This open framework, which is inclusive of methodologies, legitimizes different forms of teacher knowledge.

To have a fully critical methodology, however, at least two things are needed in addition to the framework and conceptualization of practitioner research as envisioned by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, 2009). The first is an explicitly critical epistemology. A critical epistemology sees all knowledge as political and knowledge production as a political process (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Critical race theorists and feminists in particular have raised the question repeatedly of in

this political process, whose voices are heard? Women, people of color, and “non-native” speakers in TESOL, especially those who are students or practitioners, are typically marginalized voices in academically controlled knowledge production. Experiential knowledge and alternative forms of knowledge production and sharing, such as storytelling, testimonials, chronicles, narratives, etc., need to be given greater weight to correct this imbalance (Yosso, 2005).

Participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1984; 1997; Freire, 1982; McTaggart, 1991) is one branch of action research that does fit the critical paradigm. It is radically inclusive of all voices and envisioned clearly as a tool for making political change through collective research and action (McTaggart, 1991). Freire (1982, developed from a speech given in 1972) laid out the groundwork for a participatory action research first, while not using that term specifically. His 1982 paper called for a line of research that fit with the principles of a critical pedagogy wherein the teacher (or teacher-researcher) is not solely in control of knowledge or knowledge production. Rather, the students and other participants are seen as equals in terms of being co-investigators and knowledge producers.

While acknowledging the value of participatory action research, I take up critical practitioner research as a method instead because there are times and places where it is not always possible or appropriate to involve students as co-collaborators in educational research, yet that research is still undertaken from a critical stance. Time pressure, workload, and in some cases even the potentially dangerous consequences of critical educational research might preclude a more participatory project. Unequal power imbalances when doing participatory action research in education, especially with younger learners, may also be inescapable and result in the teacher driving the inquiry while claiming that all have a voice in the process, a problem that is acknowledged by McTaggart (1991). This paper is one such case where time pressures on both myself as the teacher-researcher and the students as participants with already overfull class schedules, not to mention differing interests, prevented a participatory research that was nonetheless critical. Critical practitioner research does however see collaborative work as ideal.

A critical method of inquiry not only seeks to be radically inclusive of voices, but also seeks to be transformative or even emancipatory. Participatory action research generally seeks larger numbers of collaborators who can in theory have more of an impact on their local context than a single researcher working alone. Therefore, critical practitioner research seeks a more humble political agenda of critical awareness-raising at the least, while striving always toward changes

that increase social justice. Recognizing that collective, community action is the best hope for change, it seeks to draw attention to issues that can then be acted on by the community.

Second, critical practitioner research should be explicitly fluid and dynamic. Research and teaching should never be at odds, and good praxis should never be sacrificed in the name of “good” research. The two should be intertwined. To be so, the methodology must be open to change throughout the course of the project. Of course, many methodologies are so, including several qualitative methodologies. Ethnographers, narrative inquirers, and so on are free to adapt and change the nature of their inquiry in the face of a fluid reality. One area of action research that can be adapted is where it is conceived of as a cyclical process, rather than a linear one (i.e., McKernan, 1996). Posing problems or questions often results in more questions or problems arising. Multiple different forms of inquiry may be needed to answer the questions, just as in pedagogy several different kinds of inquiry may be needed to get at the answers or solutions to problems posed.

### ***Research with Young Learners***

A final note on classroom research methodology here is that I am aware in writing of the way I am representing events and conclusions. Educational research has a special responsibility toward the representation of children and their positions and thoughts that should be constantly questioned and evaluated (Jipson, 2000). While it is not possible to include the student voices to the extent I would like, the knowledge shared in this paper was co-produced with my students. What follows are my interpretations of this knowledge. I will make clear my own position throughout as the teacher-researcher. My writing is intended to be self-reflexive, to make clear how I am making my interpretations (Ramanathan, 2005).

### ***Data***

Data in this paper include: photos of physical classroom environments (i.e., graffiti written on the walls), student worksheets, drawings, class surveys, book evaluations, evaluations of my teaching, student journals, other writing samples from class, materials created by students to cheat on tests, learning materials created by students to learn, examples of ULS textbooks, and feedback cards about what students learned (see Table 2 for the complete list along with which

class the data was gathered from). The classes themselves have already been described in detail above.

Table 2

*List of Classes Studied and Data Sources Gathered from Those Classes*

Class	Dates of Class	Data Gathered
Honors AP2	March 2011 – Feb. 2012	Student surveys Student journals and in-class writings Student created learning materials
NEK classes 1 & 2	March 2011 – May 2012*	Images of classroom environments Student worksheets Student journals and in-class writings Student created learning materials ULS textbook samples Student surveys Student drawings
Middle B/A/H	March 2011 – May 2012**	Images of classroom environments Student surveys Student work and in-class writings Cheat sheets Student book evaluations Student evaluations of teaching
Middle C	March 2011 – Feb. 2012	Student worksheets and quizzes Student notes passed in class
Pre-Middle	Sept. 2011 – Feb. 2012	Images of classroom environments

Notes:

\*The class split into two separate classes with additional students joining both new classes in March 2012.

\*\*Many of the students I taught in Middle B leveled up at the end of the year to Middle A where I continued to teach them.

For each example in the following sections used from the data collection, I give the date (month and year) when it was collected and the class it was collected from.

The data listed above and analyzed in this paper represent only a small part of the total amount of data that were collected over the course of this project, in order to focus the analysis to fit within the scope of this paper.

### *Analysis*

In this section, I will describe how I interpret the data that I have collected, and how I use it to tell a story. I use two levels of analysis, narrative and materialist, to put together the data gathered into a cohesive story. I will first explain the narrative portion of my analysis before moving on to explain what I mean by “materialist.”

*Narrative analysis.* I use Barkuizen's (2013) definition of narrative. He defines narrative as an action, as "narrative knowledging," saying that narrative is "something we do, and in the process we understand that experience" (Barkuizen, 2013, p. 4, emphasis in original). In this way, narrative knowledging is a way of producing knowledge. It is also a social activity. We discursively construct narratives in specific contexts that are bound by time and place and present them to an audience who then interprets our narrative for themselves (Barkuizen, 2013). In this paper, I use data collected from my classrooms – from my students – to create a narrative. In using their materials, I am discursively constructing this narrative with them. In presenting it to you, the reader, the narrative is being further constructed by your understanding and interpretation of the narrative in this paper. This is the full process of narrative knowledging for Barkuizen (2013).

Narrative is also an epistemology, a way of knowing the world. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou write, narrative is "a way of constructing knowledge requiring a particular commitment and even bias from the researcher in addition to a political stance" (2012, p. 19). Clandinin and Connelly (1990) make the case that humans are naturally storytellers and that stories are how we (collectively and individually) make sense of our world and experiences. Narratives allow teachers to understand their own experience in order to "resist and revise the scripting narratives of the culture and begin to compose their own," (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 7). I craft my narrative in a similar vein. I want to show how my own experience, as a teacher doing critical practitioner research, changed and was influenced by my experiences. In this paper I compose my narrative to disrupt and challenge limited imaginings of the contexts in which critical pedagogy can be practiced, and to expand understandings of how it might be practiced.

In order to craft a narrative, to do narrative knowledging with my data, I use narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a way of configuring data that has been collected into a unified story that gives meaning to the data as "contributors to a goal or purpose" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). Narrative analysis is different from the analysis of narrative in that the latter uses stories as data while the former uses story telling as a way of analyzing data and presenting findings (Barkuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995).

The data that I examine for this paper is non-narrative, meaning that it does not necessarily fit into a cohesive narrative on its own. There are some data, like student journals, that have narrative elements, but this study is not an analysis of narratives that they present and so treats



them as non-narrative in and of themselves. In order to bring together non-narrative data in a coherent story through analysis, I use emplotment. Emplotment is way of combining different events into a unified story or creating a plot to link the data in a story line (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through emplotment, “narrative imposes order on the chaos of human experience of the world” (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 18) since we do not make sense of our world event by event, but rather in larger structures (Bruner, 1990, cited in Polkinghorne, 1995). Polkinghorne’s example of emplotment is the combining of two events such as “the king died; the prince cried” (1995, p. 7). Putting the events together gives additional meaning and leads to a better understanding of the events. By putting them together, we see that the prince cried because the king died. I use emplotment on two levels with my data. I combine events into a narrative throughout the entire narrative, for example by sharing the data and narrative of student resistance before sharing my data and narrative of critical pedagogy. Although the data on student resistance and my evolving practice to critical pedagogy were collected simultaneously, putting the data on resistance first allows me to tell the story of how student resistance was part of my turn to critical pedagogy.

This study differs from other narrative studies that use narrative analysis to create a coherent story out of non-narrative data (i.e., Benson, 2013). In the case of Benson’s (2013) study, he calls for the narrative to be the product of the research, to be presented with a reflection on the process, but without an explicit analysis. Since my data sources differ from that of most narrative studies, which use interviews, diaries, or other inherently narrative data (Benson, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), and because I also apply a materialist analysis to the data within the narrative, I follow Kaasila’s (2007) example of describing for each section my process of emplotment. In her study, Kaasila (2007) creates space in her paper for a separate section to write about her process of emplotment explicitly, including how she chose which details to include and how she went about putting them in a specific sequence. This is important in making the emplotment more transparent to readers who can then judge for themselves the validity of the choices. In doing this, I go counter to Benson (2013), whose argument is that without analysis, readers would be able to make their own interpretations of the data. However, I believe that readers will be able to better make their interpretations of my data if I explain my process for each section. They will also be able to judge my analysis, rather than having the analysis implied in the written narrative product.

**Materialist analysis.** Within the narrative analysis, I embed a materialist analysis. In this section, I will define materialist analysis and explain how I use the analysis to give an additional level of meaning to the data that I present in the following sections.

By materialist, I mean a focus on the material realities of the hagwon context. The relevant understandings of materialist in this paper come from material feminism (i.e., Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Hennessy, 1993; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In material feminism, analysis focuses not only on physical objects as materials, but also on physical conditions of subjects (i.e., economic conditions) along with discourse (Hennessy, 1993). In the hagwon context, this means being attentive to the neoliberal economic context in which hagwons exist (as I laid out in section one), as well as being attentive to the physical conditions in which the students learn (i.e., under surveillance from CCTV, built environment), and the material objects with which they learn (i.e., ULS produced textbooks, YouTube videos, etc.).

The material conditions under examination in this sort of analysis draw on lines of feminist theory that focus on the body and natural world (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). The body is that which is ultimately used in protest or confined. In analyzing the resistance of my students especially, it was helpful for me to remember that schooling is as much about learning as it is about bodily confinement and control of pupils. Students and teachers are assigned rooms and times to be in those rooms during which learning should occur. This is a basic fact of most educational systems, including ULS, which cannot go unacknowledged at least although the Korean hagwon system can be extreme with students in class for up to 11 hours per day (including both public school hours and hagwon hours).

A materialist analysis looks at not only the material conditions of the macro level economic environment and the meso-level-built environment of the hagwon, but also at the material objects that mediate learning in the classroom. A focus on material objects and tools in applied linguistics specifically, comes from activity theory, a central theory of learning in socio-cultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In activity theory, tools, both physical (i.e., computers, pencils, paper, etc.) and symbolic (i.e., language), mediate activities such as language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This tool mediated activity, no matter what it is, is a social activity because the nature of making and using tools is social (Leontiev, 1981).

I use the focus on material objects in the classroom to analyze how they relate to the control and production of knowledge in the classroom. Since the tools (i.e., textbooks, computers,

phones, etc.) are constructed by humans, material objects and the conditions they create are imbued with a political and often economic purpose. Chun (2009) and Gray (2012) examine textbooks and other classroom materials for the discourses (political ideologies) they serve, but they do not examine the textbooks as material objects, and do not take up the economic point of textbooks generally, which is to sell as many as possible using whatever means necessary.

This is a point that Apple (1991) does take up in an in-depth analysis of textbooks as cultural artifacts that are produced through a capitalist system of production. Apple's (1991) argument is that publishing is a political economic process that legitimizes certain knowledge (that of the elite) over other knowledges, deciding the question of whose knowledge counts. To take Freire's (2000) analogy of banking education, if the students are the clients and the teachers are the bankers who are depositing knowledge into their brains, then the textbooks are the accounts from which that knowledge is mainly being drawn.

***Materialist narrative analysis.*** The subject matter of narratives should be human action (Polkinghorne, 1995). Human action by students, me, and other actors at ULS is at the heart of this narrative, but with an emphasis on the material conditions they operate in, and their relation to the material objects that mediate their action.

Narratives are a traditional tool of critical educators to disrupt and present counter-narratives to the culturally generated Grand Narratives, according to Ritchie and Wilson (2000). Embedding a narrative retelling of a personal story with an examination of material objects created during the course of the narrative not only helps to add meaning to the narrative itself, but also allows for deeper meaning to be found in the relations of the people in the narrative to those objects.

Enriching the narrative with a materialist view allows me to examine, for instance, the relationship between students and the mode of knowledge production when using textbooks as opposed to learner-created materials. Showing the materials aids in the telling of my own development by sharing what was possible while explaining why it was possible at the time due to both my internal doubts and external factors that limited my interventions and changes in curriculum. In critical pedagogy, students and teachers are assumed to be simultaneously learner-teachers or teacher-learners. Banking education should be supplanted by problem-posing education, but one of the barriers to that, which materialist narrative analysis allows us to focus on, is the set curriculum especially as physically represented in the classroom by textbooks,

teacher's guidebooks, and schedules among other things. These objects place the control over production of knowledge in the classroom more firmly in the hands of the teacher. Openings for different possibilities, and more equitable control over the means of English language knowledge production, can be found both through examining these objects and by the telling of stories that find alternatives.

The following sections present my narrative of development along with images of the material objects, an analysis of these materials as they relate to control and power in the classroom, and descriptions of the material conditions of learning and my students. They will hopefully serve to show how critical pedagogy can be done in unfavorable conditions, as well as the challenges of doing so.

## STUDENT RESISTANCE

### *Introduction*

My turn to critical pedagogy came, as I have written, from my own personal desire to have my professional life fit with my personal values, and being an authoritarian teacher did not fit. My turn to critical pedagogy also came, however, from student resistance to my teaching. Their resistance in many cases was not only to my teaching, but to hagwons and English language education in general. Their unhappiness as expressed through various forms of resistance made it impossible for me not to notice the problems associated with hagwon learning and to seek to transform the environment in which we were confined together.

In this section, it is possible to see through artifacts and images of the students' resistance how they show their opposition to the material conditions of the hagwon. Their efforts are focused against being bodily confined in classrooms for long periods of time (up to 11 hours per day) and to authoritarian teachers who delivered a curriculum they had no say in, with no choice given but to remain seated and absorb what their teacher was telling them or to memorize and practice the language they were supposed to have learned.

In my first year (2009), veteran teachers at ULS gave us a handful of culture-specific corporal punishment techniques for dealing with older students. We could require students to stand with their hands above their heads, holding our teacher's basket. Each time they further transgressed according to our judgment, we could add a book to the basket. We could also have

them stand with their hands above their heads outside the classroom. The wide spread use of these types of classroom management techniques in Korea at the time are evidenced by their depiction in popular TV shows (i.e., *High Kick!* 2006 – 2007). These were not limited to use by teachers at ULS only. While I eventually found that critical pedagogy eliminated much of the traditional classroom management problems with older students (aged 10 – 15 in my case), I would have to run a gauntlet of student resistance to the material conditions of their learning before reaching this understanding.

### *Instances of Student Resistance*

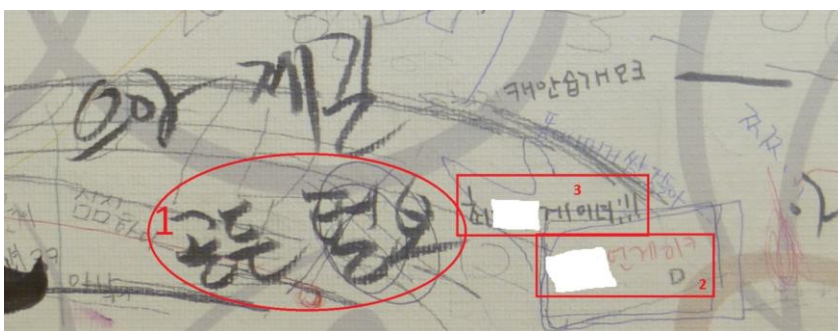
The purpose of the following images is to show various forms of student resistance in my classrooms. I use emplotment to create a larger story of more systematic and collective resistance by bringing together several individual examples. Individually, the acts of resistance I show may have had different aims (i.e., to disrupt class, for pleasure, etc.) and targets (i.e., different individual teachers), but collectively they become part of a larger story of resistance to English language education at ULS. Rather than using emplotment to create a single coherent narrative, as I do in sections four and five, I tell several smaller narratives that I connect at the end of the section. For each example, I will also discuss how the resistance depicted challenges materially the conditions of learning at ULS.

I will start with the most visible form of their resistance to both the system and myself - graffiti. Graffiti is carefully defined in hip-hop literature as “graffiti murals” that are done in public, and for the sake of fame, for example, tagging or writing one’s name or alias in public places and often denigrated in negative comparisons to mainstream “art” (Bloch, 2012a). Graffiti has many other purposes beyond this, however, and the graffiti done on the classroom walls at ULS functions much in the same way. It is used as a medium of communication (Figures 1, 2, 4), as a means to brag (Figure 3), as a means of artistic expression (Figures 3, 5), and to signal social identity (Bloch, 2012b). In Figures 1 and 2 alone, we can see tagging, back and forth commentary, mockery, bragging, art, and multiple markers of social identity.

Figure 1. Wall in classroom #11.



Figure 2. Student graffiti #1 “Gordon is hairy” “O [teacher] is gay” Middle B, November 2011.



The close up of the wall in Figure 1 can be seen in Figure 2. This portion of the wall in classroom #11 at ULS, being more hidden from the teachers’ gaze, was the most densely packed space of graffiti in ULS (although it was far from the only location of graffiti as later examples will show). It is worth noting that this area was within the view of the CCTV camera. No action was taken by ULS administration to clean the graffiti or reprimand students during the years I taught there (2009 – 2012). I will discuss the reasons for the inaction later in the section after giving more examples. It is worth noting that on a site visit in 2014, the wallpaper in this classroom had been replaced, although there was new graffiti covering the walls in this and other classrooms I visited.

In Figures 1 and 2 it is clear that the students physically transformed the walls of their confinement to a space for discourse fully controlled by themselves. There are many things happening in terms of expression, identity construction, and resistance happening on this wall

alone, but I will focus here on two examples that specifically demonstrate resistance to the teachers (myself and O). Example 1, seen above in Figure 2 as a red circle marked by the number 1, shows where a student has written *골든 털보* or “Gordon is hairy.” The comment serves to both mark my difference as a foreign teacher (having hairy arms was a noticeable marker of foreignness for students) and make me a figure that can be mocked or not taken seriously. This example of undermining my authority was not limited to only me. There is also a comment about “O”, my co-teacher for the class (who taught Middle B in the period following my class, in the same room, #11).

Example 2 in Figure 2 shows where students have written *XX 언게이* “O [teacher] is gay.” The questioning of the teacher’s sexuality is meant to undermine the authority that teacher possessed over the class in the same way as the comment directed at me. Someone responded in example 3, writing *최 XX 게이녀* (Choi [a common family name] is a lesbian). Example 3 was presumably directed at the person who commonly wrote on the wall (Choi’s name is written in large bubble letters on the wooden trim below the wall paper in Figure 1). This highlights the ways in which the space of the wall was contested.

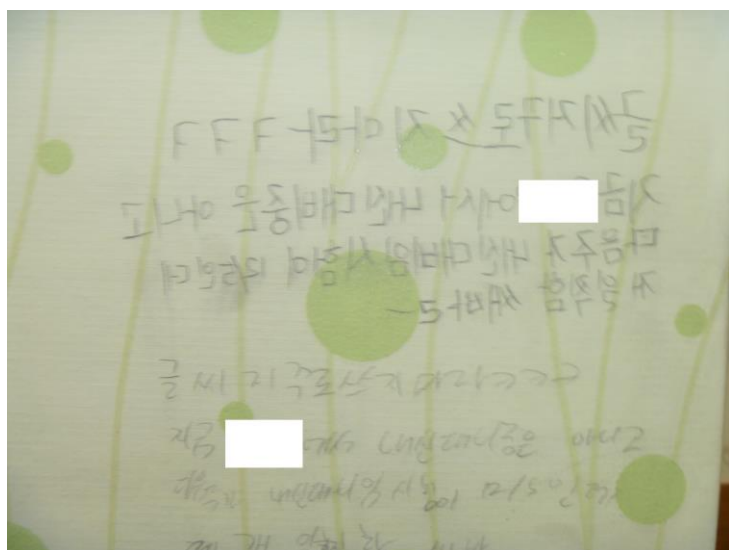
There was hearsay as to the provenance of this comment. Students claimed “O” had written it. “O” confirmed with me only that s/he did respond to the comment in example 2 by writing a response on the wall. By responding with her/his own comments on the wall, “O” was participating in a conversation that was started by the students and ultimately controlled by them within the space of this wall. The student control of the wall is evidenced in the fact that “O” could not punish the students for what was written there, even with evidence from CCTV and knowing who wrote the comment. Rather, “O’s” only response was to participate in the dialogue. Student control of the wall after the teacher’s participation is evidenced in the continuing existence and additions to the graffiti long after this incident.

Figure 3. Student graffiti #2, “I am god” Middle B, November, 2011.



Figure 3 shows graffiti that took up a large part of the wall facing the door to the classroom. It is a self-portrait of one of the female middle school students proclaiming that she is god, 나는 신이다. This sort of bragging could be a way of using discourse and materially produced art to challenge the student’s position of subjection to the will of the teacher and hagwon. At the very least it challenges the hagwon’s claim to ownership and control of the physical environment and exerts student agency in altering that physical space.

Figure 4. Student graffiti #3, backwards writing. Middle B, November, 2011.





The words in this piece are written backwards reading: “Don’t write the letters backwards hahaha I am not studying for the school exam, or preparing for class. The school exam is going to be next week. The test is on 12/5, we prepare for it early. Fuck.”

Figure 4 was written on the back wall of the classroom, directly facing the whiteboard and would have been in the direction the teacher always looked if standing at the front of the room. It is a thinly disguised (written backwards) statement of defiance to not only the hagwon curriculum (class), but also the state English curriculum (school exam – school refers to the public school rather than the hagwon). Hagwons often devote class time to helping students prepare for their public school English exams, a higher score for the students being proof of the parents’ wise investment in additional English language education for their children. The middle school test scores are important for entry into good high schools, which in turn are important in helping students gain entry into the best universities. The student here has appropriated the space of her/his confinement again to post a message, but this one is remarkable for its direct defiance of the hagwon system of control.

Figure 5. *Student graffiti #4, “mushroom” Middle B, November 2011.*



Image 4 is interesting for its relative sophistication artistically. None of the other images use color or abstract imagery in the same way. It does not participate in the surrounding discourse, but rather stands out from it. Given South Korea’s political and cultural negative views of drugs other than tobacco and alcohol, it is unlikely that this image is drug related. Rather, it seems to

be a surrealist expression of resistance through escape. The artist obviously had to have been quite invested mentally in creating this image, which then becomes a visual distraction or escape for other students looking at it later as they sat in class.

Taken together, this graffiti has the effect of subverting the physical control exerted on the students bodily by the hagwon. They may be required to stay in a classroom for long periods of time and to be subject to the teacher, who is applying the curriculum of the hagwon, but they can speak back. They can control in some ways the physical environment and therefore the discourses that occur within it.

Acts of resistance serve multiple purposes. Scott (1985, 1990) draws on Willis' (1981) landmark study of working class school boys in England, in addition to his own findings, to show that these acts serve to socialize participants into social groups. They also serve to strengthen ties and social bonds within groups.

Figure 6. *Wads of wet tissue paper stuck on the window. Pre-middle class, September 2011.*

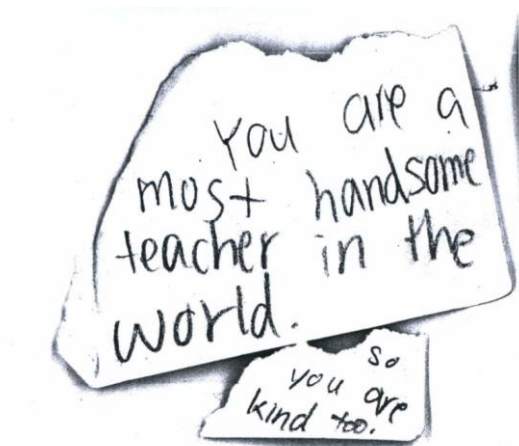


Figure 6 shows wet wads of tissue paper from the bathroom that have been stuck to the outside of the window during a class break. While none of the students were willing to explain to me the reason or purpose behind this act, and in fact denied that it even happened or having any knowledge of it happening, what was clear was that it created a bond among the classmates in opposition to the teachers. All of the students took pleasure in knowing that they were in on a secret rebellion that puzzled and angered teachers, but for which they were unlikely to (and did not) receive punishment.

As noted at the beginning of this section, all of these acts of resistance occurred under the surveillance of CCTV cameras, one of which is visible in the corner of the center top of the picture in Figure 6. The graffiti in some instances was likely to have been created during classes, especially in room #11 where the area most covered is not directly observable by the instructor. Much of it was also likely created during break times. The fact that students were not reprimanded by higher administrative authorities for these acts speaks to the institutional ideology of students as customers in a neoliberal context. To punish them or make these acts known to the parents could cause embarrassment or anger that could lead to the parent withdrawing their child from the program. This loss of revenue was to be avoided at all costs. Many of the times when students were reprimanded occurred when their actions could potentially cause a loss of revenue (i.e., fighting with other students whose parents could remove them from an unsafe environment, or severely disrupting class to the point of other parents complaining).

All of these examples, except Figure 6, come from the same room (#11) and class (Middle B). Other examples of graffiti could and can still (as of August 2014) be found in every classroom that is used by upper elementary (4<sup>th</sup> grade – 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and middle school (7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade) students at ULS. The following examples show other forms of resistance from different classes.

Figure 7. *Resistance by flattery. Honors AP 2, June 2011.*



Some of the most creative resistance I experienced in my time teaching was what I term “resistance by flattery.” Figure 7 shows two notes given to me by students in my AP 2 class at the beginning of our class time. After giving me these notes, they asked me as a class if they could then have a game day, rather than following our regular lesson plan. This ended up being

the opening of negotiations on the class schedule. We reached a compromise of the last 15 minutes of class being devoted to a game related to the lesson (which I had prepared already but had not planned on using for that day specifically). The students disrupted the material exercise of classroom control by the teacher. Resistance was used by this group of students with clear goals of subverting or disrupting the routine in order to increase their agency and control over their learning and their lives.

Figure 8. Note written on the pages of book. Middle C, October 2011.

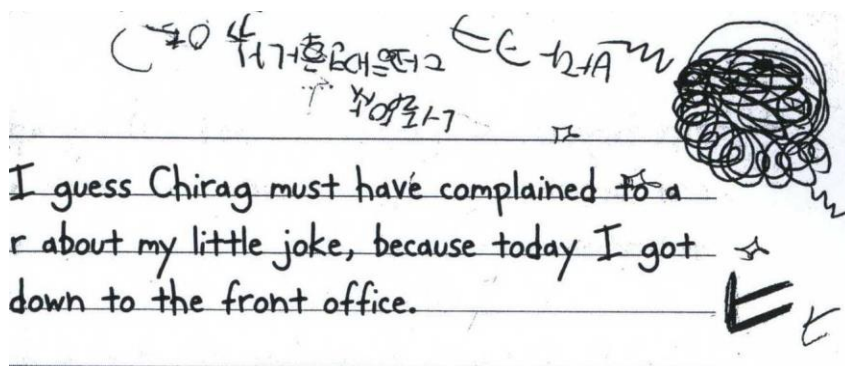


Figure 8 illustrates a small part of a larger resistance movement that sought to physically alter classroom materials like books and textbooks. It shows the top of a page from a novel that the class was reading together (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*) with comments written on the top of the page by a student as a note to another student during reading time. Written communication between students on paper was uncommon since students most often communicated secretly during class by text message, but this offers some visual evidence of a “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990). While publicly there may be a show of obedience in class, behind it are “hidden transcripts” that conceal opportunistic resistance to power (Scott, 1990). In class, this was often the case. In my Middle C and B classes in particular, which were required to read novels above their reading level, when I enforced sustained silent reading or oral reading, students gave the impression of acquiescence by sitting quietly and reading when called on during oral reading. When my attention was focused elsewhere, though, they seized the chance to create their own dialogues counter to my lesson.

The students' use of Korean in classes at times also had the purpose of subverting my plans or countering my power. As my Korean ability increased, I was able to understand and decipher some of these "hidden transcripts," which created some discomfort, but was also enlightening.

Figures 9 through 13 illustrate ways in which student resistance was applied directly to classroom materials that were designed to test their learning. Figure 9 is of a daily vocabulary quiz given to pre-middle and middle school classes every day. The students have word lists that they are supposed to study and memorize. They are then given 20 – 30 new words per class (2 – 3 times per week) to memorize, depending on their class level.

Figure 9. Vocabulary test. Middle B, October 2011.

DAY 45 이학년  
Word Power Test (승물+veca)  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Score: \_\_\_\_\_

	English	Korean meaning
1	climb.	오르다, 올라가다, 높아지다, 승선하다
2	ABCDEFGHIJ	부분, 구획, (도시 등의) 구역, 지역
3	KLMNOP	규모, 정도, 계급, 축척, 직율
4	QRSTU VWX	파산한, 지불 불능의, 파산시키다
5	Spin to you	~의 뜻으로 돌리다
6	adult	<del>성인</del> , 성자
7	自重力	에스컬레이터, 자동 계단
8	YZ, wow	부패한, 부정확한, 부패시키다
9	正氣	(정기) 구독하다
10	-st	<del>희생, 계몽</del>
11	know-	~을 의식하고 있는, 알고 있는, 의식이 있는
12	Bomb	갑자기 발생하다, 분출하다
13	bye	(약 등을) 처방하다
14	I'm 心	<del>신성한, 종교적인</del>
15	心	양심, 도덕심
16	中 ?	가로막다, 방해하다, 중단시키다
17	technology	묘사하다, 기술하다
18	Helio	일상적인, 틀에 박힌
19	road	길, 향로, 노선
20	scientific	과학적인, 과학의

The student who filled out this test was able to answer only question numbers 1, 19, and 20 correctly. An attempt was made to give the correct answer for numbers five and 17, but

purposefully wrong and mocking or playful answers are given for the rest. Question numbers two through four are answered with the alphabet. Numbers seven, nine, 15 and 16 are answered in *hanja* (Chinese characters) that could clearly not be the correct answers on an English vocabulary test. Number 10 gives the name of the student's friend (full name redacted). Numbers 14 and 18 in particular suggest that the student is mocking the exam with the answers of "I'm 무교 [atheist, a joking reference to the requested English word for religious]" and "Hello" which are clearly not the answer and directed at the audience of the writing, the teacher grading the test.

The students' refusal to use the materials as directed by teachers and administration at the hagwon put teachers in a difficult position. The tests were administered during class time, but by a curriculum director, not the teachers. The curriculum director would give the test papers to teachers in their rooms at the beginning of the first period of class for the students and pick the completed test papers up after 10 minutes. Blatant mocking of the exam, as shown in Figure 3, could not only result in punishment for the student, but also a reprimand for the teacher for not having better control of the students.

Figure 10. Cheat sheet for vocabulary test, Middle B, October 2011.

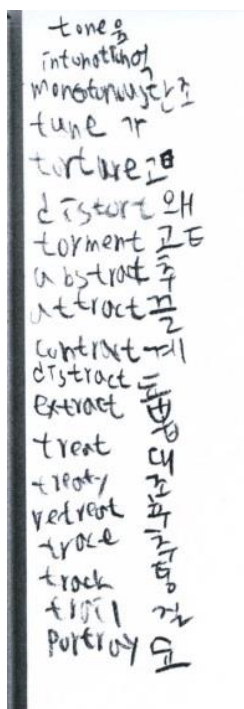


Figure 10 shows a different kind of resistance to the test. Rather than outright mocking of the test and refusal to answer, Figure 10 shows a student cheat sheet that was used to complete the test correctly and get a good score. Physical cheat sheets were rare because of the proliferation of smart phones. Students more often had taken a photo of the word list before the test on their smart phone. Actual paper cheat sheets became more popular when the hagwon adopted a policy of collecting student phones in a basket at the beginning of each class, furthering material control of the students and their access to resources that were undesirable. Both the phones and paper cheat sheets were used in the same way, however, hidden on the students' laps beneath the desk, to be looked at when the teacher was not watching (regardless of CCTV). Cheat sheets were more common than examples like Figure 9 because the hagwon also established a detention policy to punish those students who failed to answer at least 80% of the questions correctly. Students would be further confined at the school in a room with a row of desks with only their wordlists allowed on the desks, with the intent that they spend their time studying, for an additional hour at the end of hagwon classes, from 9:00 pm to 10:00 pm, the latest time allowed by law for students to remain studying at a hagwon.

Figures 11 and 12 represent arguably lower stakes resistance for the students but a difficult problem for me. The quizzes in these two figures were designed by me for a novel that I was given to teach. The novel was beyond the language proficiency level of the students, who were placed into the lowest level beginner English class for middle school students. Nonetheless, we were expected to cover a novel written for American middle school students in the class. We were also expected to assess the students' learning of the content in the novel and use of language they were supposed to learn from the novel. While I did my best to work through the novel with the students, even watching segments of the movie based on the novel for the corresponding sections in the book to help them understand, and preparing extra worksheets and study guides, when it came time for assessment, the students expressed their displeasure with the curriculum that was forced upon them. Some of them, like those shown in Figures 11 and 12, refused to participate in my assessment.

Figure 11. Worksheet #1, Middle C, November 2011.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid Quiz 2      Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Matching

<p><u>C</u> Accident</p> <p><u>h</u> Injury</p> <p><u>b</u> Foolproof</p> <p><u>h</u> Responsible</p> <p><u>e</u> Confused</p> <p><u>d</u> Budget</p> <p><u>f</u> Culprit</p> <p><u>j</u> Evacuate</p> <p><u>g</u> Assembly</p> <p><u>a</u> Hygienist</p>	<p>a. someone who cleans teeth</p> <p>b. something that can not fail</p> <p>c. something that was a mistake</p> <p>d. something to help you know how much money there is</p> <p>e. not knowing what is happening or why</p> <p>f. the person who did a bad thing</p> <p>g. a gathering of people, especially students</p> <p>h. to be trustworthy, to always do your duty</p> <p>i. getting hurt</p> <p>j. to have to leave a building quickly</p>
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Multiple Choice:

1. Who is Greg in love with?

A. His dentist

B. His hygienist

C. His girlfriend

D. His puppy

2. How is Greg not responsible? (circle all of the correct answers)

A. He left the refrigerator open.

B. He forgot to clean his room.

C. He forgot to take out the recycling.

D. He forgot a key in a door.

E. He failed to take care of his egg.

F. He forgot to shower.

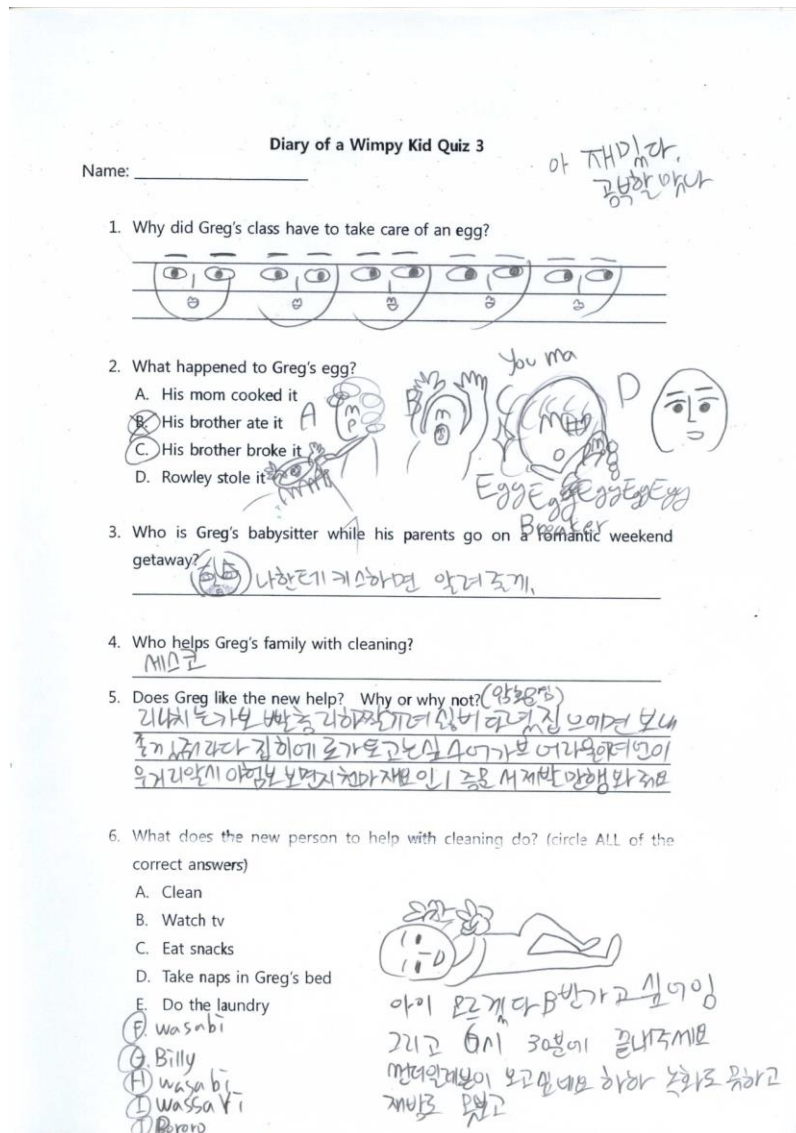
Short answer:

Name 5 characters in the book.

Greg, Rodrick, Rowley, Fry, (Greg Dad/Mom)



Figure 12. Quiz #2, Middle C, December, 2011.



Similar to Figure 9, these two examples (11 and 12) show not just a refusal to answer, but a blatant challenge to me as a teacher by purposefully answering incorrectly. The result of these was to pose a direct challenge to my authority and control over the production and reproduction of knowledge in the classroom. I was unable to force the students to answer correctly, to reproduce what they were supposed to have learned, and did not even attempt to make the students to retake the quizzes. These examples in particular helped me to realize the limited nature of my control in the class. While I could have potentially complained to my co-teacher and had the quizzes sent home with a note to the students' parents, I felt this would have the

ultimate effect of breaking any future trust that might be built. Instead, it hastened my turn to critical pedagogy as a means of dealing with the resistance.

Figure 13 shows my attempt to shift the nature of the assessments in response to the students' resistance. Instead of terming them "quizzes," I instead settled for "worksheets," which semantically is less threatening to students. I also changed the questions to be personal response questions related to the content rather than questions directly about the content. My hope was to use these materials then to spark a dialogue in class that connected the students' own experiences and problems with those of the main character, Greg, in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book. It is clear from Figure 13 that this was at least some of the time more successful. Students were more apt to take the questions about themselves seriously and to answer honestly.

Figure 13. *Worksheet #2, Middle C, December 2011.*

Diary of a Wimpy Kid  
Movie Worksheet 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you think it is important to be popular at school? Why or why not?  
No. Because It's not plus ~~it~~ study.
2. What is a different name for P.E. class?  
HELL
3. What is your favorite thing to do in P.E. class? Why?  
Soccer. It's very exiting and fun.
4. What do you hate to do in P.E. class? Why?  
teacher, she is ~~to~~ make my class anoying.
5. If you could cut one class, what class would you cut?  
P.E.

In Figure 13, all of the questions have been answered in ways that show that the student was taking the exercise seriously. This is perhaps partly an effect of the questions requesting personal experience, which privileges the production of knowledge from the student, rather than expecting a reproduction of knowledge that has been transmitted by the teacher to the student. In particular, this worksheet shows how not only has my position been challenged, but the student has trusted

me enough to provide honest answers about her/his feelings about physical education class (“HELL”), and also her/his feelings about the physical education teacher (“she is make my class anoying [sic]”). By entrusting me with this information, the student may be testing me to see what I do with this information, but I felt it was part of beginning to gain the students’ trust, or at least to not be seen as a “normal” teacher who would not tolerate challenges to authority.

The images and material artifacts shared in this section clearly show a resistance by students not only to the discourses of the hagwon and in broader Korean society about English language learning, but they are rebelling against the material conditions of their learning. As Edwards (1985) says, the task for material analysis of resistance is to find interconnections between the individual acts to better understand the organization and nature of the resistance. In the case of ULS students, all of the acts of resistance were directed at related targets: the hagwon, the teachers, and the curriculum.

### ***Summary of Emplotment***

The data presented in this section were gathered mainly during a four-month period from September – December 2011 (with the exception of the resistance by flattery note). Student resistance was on-going both before and after the period in which I collected this data, but the time period of its collection represented a particularly difficult moment in time for me in teaching my pre-middle and middle school classes especially. Since the data come from this period, they are some of the strongest examples of student resistance that occurred during my time at ULS, aside from other instances that were non-visual. I do not discuss other non-visual forms of resistance (e.g. gossip) because I do not have audio recordings or field notes of such resistance from which to draw concrete examples.

I believe that my critical epistemology was crucial to my seeing the graffiti and other acts committed by the students as resistance. Many of the other teachers did not notice or discuss graffiti, although it was present in almost every room. I had noticed the graffiti in my classrooms, but also began to pay much closer attention to the graffiti once I realized that I was a subject being discussed in the graffiti. There are many reasons that other teachers may not have noticed or felt that the many small acts, the “weapons of the weak,” deployed by the students did not constitute resistance or were not combined as a way of making sense of student behavior. One simple reason other teachers may not have noticed things like the student graffiti, specifically,

was simply that the class schedule was such that the only time a teacher would have time to be in a classroom alone, without students, would be before the work day started or after it ended, when teachers did not typically go into the classrooms but rather stayed in the teachers' room.

The data also come from different classes. The circumstances of each individual student and each class as a group were different. Our relationships, the curriculum, and many other aspects of the class were unique. My turn to critical pedagogy was also on a different timeline with each class. In my pre-middle class, for example, I did not ever attempt critical pedagogy for many reasons, not least of which was the constant rotation of students. In my Middle B class though, I felt as if there was no alternative but critical pedagogy. By the time Middle B leveled up to Middle A at the start of the new school year, I stayed with them and used critical pedagogy to a greater extent than in any other class.

By putting all of these examples together, from different classes, and from a time period that occurred in the middle of my data collection period, I am crafting the larger narrative as I experienced it: resistance as one of the driving factors in my turn to critical pedagogy. The story of my reaction to the resistance is in some ways less important than the other story that this sort of resistance simply exists in hagwons.

The resistance I encountered pushed me to more fully embrace critical pedagogy especially as a means of materially altering the conditions of learning in my classroom, which also had an impact on the material resistance. After doing critical pedagogy, no more comments appeared on the walls about me or my co-teachers. There may have been a few added comments during this period, but there was nothing that stood out to me as resistance through graffiti. I needed to change the relations of power by democratizing the learning process, or adopting a problem-posing classroom. I also needed to change the physical materials of the class to create a space in the curriculum where students would have some higher level control of the means of English language knowledge production. The following sections will detail how I made those changes, the challenges, and the mixed outcomes that resulted.

## DEMOCRATIZING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

### *Introduction*

In this section, I recount my progression toward critical pedagogy as it emerged through two major tenets of critical pedagogy noted by Crookes (2013) as: (a) negotiating syllabi and (b) using learner-created materials. While critical pedagogy cannot in practice be separated down to its component parts, I focus on these two aspects of critical pedagogy as driving my transformation because they were the easiest concepts to translate conceptually from theory into practice (conceptually easy, but not necessarily in reality). I share and analyze artifacts such as ballots, surveys, and learner-created materials in order to tell the story of my evolution (and the possibilities for other teachers in similar contexts) first through democratizing the English language classroom, and then through using learner-created materials to shift control of the production of knowledge in the class.

### *Democratizing ULS Classes*

One of the main characteristics of critical pedagogy is that the class should be shaped in dialogic fashion with the students. This can be done through negotiating the syllabus, a process also referred to as part of creating democratic classrooms (Weiner, 2005; Wolk, 1998). This process has been previously described in Asian contexts (i.e., Hashimoto & Fukuda, 2011), and with young learners (i.e., Wolk, 1998) as well as more mainstream contexts.

Both Nation and Macalister (2010) and Crookes (2013) draw on Breen and Littlejohn's (2000) work to describe possible processes of negotiating syllabi. Nation and Macalister (2010) describe the process in terms of increasing learner-centeredness, but as an essentially apolitical process. Crookes (2013) notes this limitation in Breen and Littlejohn's work, and refers to the Freirian notion of a period of listening in which the teacher must spend time with the students and understand their context and problems before the class or curriculum can begin to be formed. This process is not practical in most situations. However, in my situation at ULS, my gradual transformation could be cast in terms of an extended listening phase. As I built relationships with the students and got to understand their problems and context, we were able to begin to define why we were there for ourselves, not just as their parents or ULS defined the reason for their

learning. Reaching that understanding through numerous dialogues gave me the confidence to allow them to negotiate the “how” and “what” of our classes.

I began the new school year in March 2011 with the intention of negotiating the syllabus with some of my classes. The first class I chose was my Honors AP2 class. I chose the AP 2 class because I already had good relationships with most of the students. In the previous semester I had taught most of them one-on-one in special English speech contest prep classes and had taught the older or young siblings of three students in the class. I felt comfortable with them.

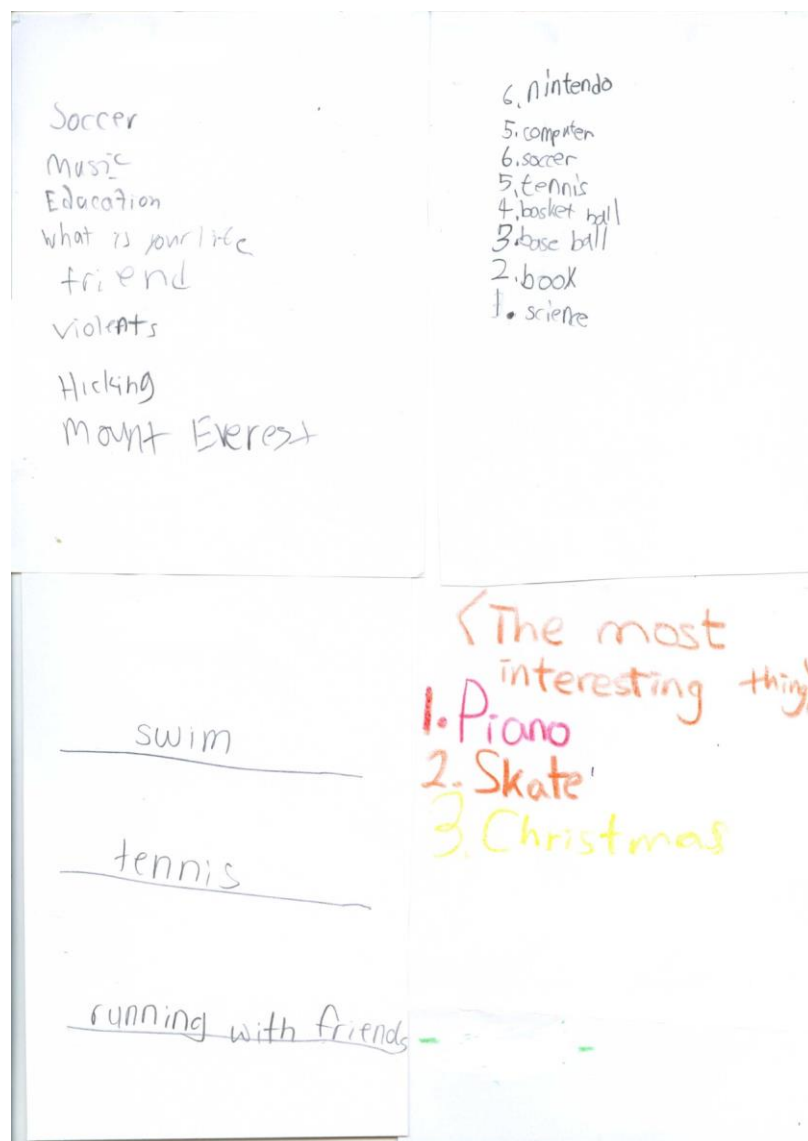
Figure 14 shows my first narrow negotiation of the syllabus with my AP 2 class. In the beginning, I simply asked the students what topics they wanted to talk or write about in class. I had them write their answers on ballots and then collected and analyzed them. Here I show examples of ballots from four students in the class. I had asked them for their top three topics only. A few things are clear from looking at the example ballots. First, some of the students refused to be limited in what they wanted to talk or write about in class. Some wrote up to eight responses while only a few wrote three only. Second, the answers on the ballots make clear how much the students wanted to put their own experiences at the center of the class. The answer “what is your life” in particular highlights this desire to put their experiences at the center, but other examples like the sports or activities are all things that the students had been or were involved in at the time. Finally, they wanted to talk about things that I would have never known about without having asked them like “Mount Everest” or “violents” (I believe the student meant to write ‘violence’).

After ranking the most popular topics, I shifted the curriculum or used supplementary materials to focus on the most popular topics. In doing this, I made several mistakes. First, this was only a democratic process in the shallowest sense. There was no transparency in how I determined what the most popular topics were or on which days we would talk about which topics. Second, this did nothing to change the material conditions of power in the classroom. I physically collected and controlled the distribution of topics. I was the one who still ultimately decided what the class would be about each day.

When I surveyed the students to see how this process was going after three months, I was surprised by the fact that they were in agreement that they did not like the topics of discussion or writing in class. I had thought I was putting them more at the center and sharing control of the class with them. This was not the case.

This beginning was inauspicious. Many teachers have done similar things with their classes, and done it better. I start here because it can help show teachers who want to negotiate that they do not need to start big, and from here there are more small steps to take before fully negotiating the syllabus. It is also important to describe my own mistakes in this process because there is often more to learn from mistakes than there is to learn from success.

Figure 14. AP 2 topic interest survey (4 surveys shown). March 2011.



I eventually attempted to do the topic surveys in all of my classes at ULS. Topics the students were interested in were something I felt fairly comfortable with integrating and was able to do so

with varying degrees of success across classes. Some programs had a more rigid syllabus (i.e., AP, NEK) than others (i.e., middle school), which allowed for more freedom in changing the content. In many of the classes though, especially the middle school classes, I was attempting to integrate their interests into the curriculum as a means to stem their resistance to the curriculum (and my teaching). The negotiation process was far from the ideal of a participatory democracy envisioned by critical pedagogy, which functions to give both teachers and students a more equal voice in an on-going dialogue. In my case with the early negotiations, I was the one holding most of the power by physically controlling the survey results and making all subsequent class decisions alone, without further consultation with the students.

My next attempt at negotiating the syllabus came three months after the first. Classes were on a three-month curriculum schedule, since especially in the upper elementary and middle school classes, there was a lot of movement and change in student population over the school year. Having a level test every three months made a natural break in the curriculum to bring in new students so they would not feel as if they were jumping into the middle of the course. This revenue increasing strategy also allowed a chance to readjust curriculum and shift directions with classes. This took the form of renegotiation as my teaching evolved.

Figure 15 shows the next generation of ballot. I increased student input on classroom activities and rewards in addition to questions about which topics they wanted to focus on in writing or discussions. Input on the activities became problematic in some classes, like the one shown below. The students did not like reading the novels that we were assigned to read by the middle school director. I could not change the novels though and this then led students to become disillusioned with the process. This helped me to use caution in negotiating only what I could realistically offer the students.

As for the activities that they enjoyed, everyone chose an activity that they had previously done in our class or another class. The example of “I like presentation with powerpoint” highlights this. Presentations had been a standard part of the curriculum for ULS classes. They served to show off the students’ ability to the parents during open house nights when parents were invited to watch presentations. They also served to promote ULS as a school when students participated in speech contests. If they won, it could help attract students (customers) and raise the prestige of ULS, so there was a large focus on presentation skills. Few students were able to articulate a desire for different learning activities, which could mean that they genuinely enjoy



some of the activities they know, but also can speak to a difficulty in imagining alternative possibilities. This is something I also learned from the second-generation ballots. We needed to have serious inquiries into alternative possibilities of what learning could be before students would be ready to accept them.

Also on this ballot, I included a choice of reward. My inclusion of reward choice is problematic, but it came as a response to the directly monetized (ULS dollars) form of reward that I wanted to escape and that students were often unhappy with. The official reward system for ULS students was a stamp system. Each teacher was issued a stamp, and each student had stamp sheets. Teachers could give students stamps for completing homework, participating in class, or any other number of reasons based on the teacher's discretion. The stamps could then be traded by students for ULS cash, which could be used to purchase toys, books or school supplies at market days (discussed more in section five). This reward system served to further reify the perceived connection between English language learning and material gain. English language learning in this sense is treated not only as a commodity to be purchased, but also one that resulted in economic gain for the recipient. This is dangerous because the idea of what education, and language, is for becomes reduced to an economic choice (in neoliberalism, the financialization of everything - Harvey, 2005).

My inclusion of a choice of reward did nothing to change or challenge this underlying ideology of the financialization of learning. Instead of ULS cash, the student merely requested the snacks or other material objects they would use the cash to purchase. I will discuss the problematic nature of this system further through another example in section five.

Figure 15. Student interest survey, Middle H, 2011.

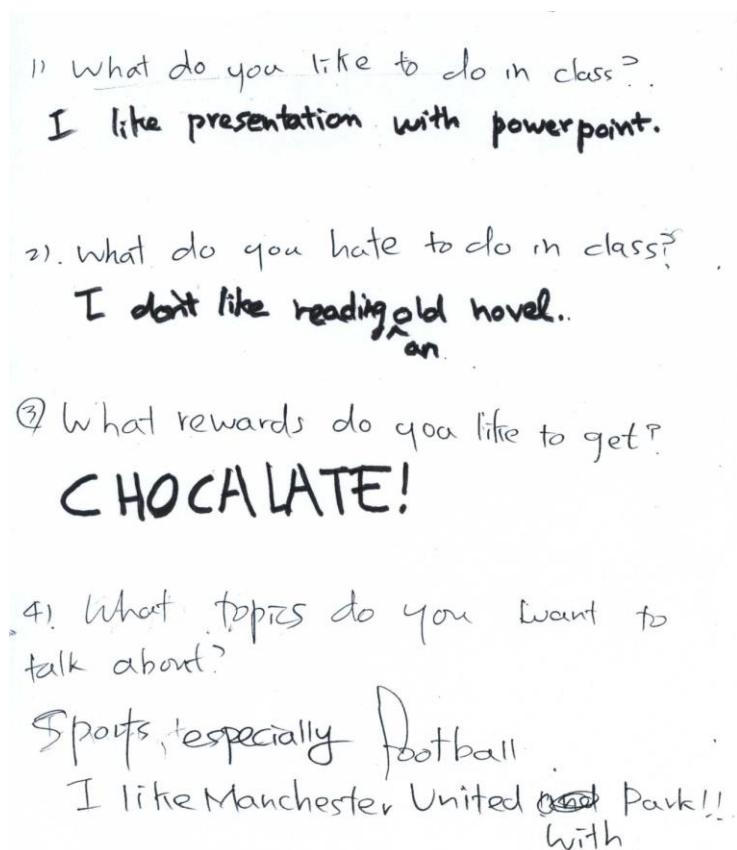


Figure 16 shows my process becoming more transparent as I compiled the results and shared them with the class. I had realized that collecting and analyzing the voting results on my own, without further student input was not working (especially after the voiced disapproval by my AP 2 class of their topics as discussed above). In later attempts, I used a handout like the one in Figure 16 to start a dialogue about what the students wanted the class to be. The handout shows the answers to three questions that were asked to the class. The number next to each indicates the number of students who wrote that particular response. There are two main things in this phase of negotiation that helped it be more successful than previous negotiating attempts. First, every student response was taken seriously, recorded on the handout and brought up for discussion. Responses to the question of what the students don't like to do in class are an example of this. Numbers four and five ("fight" and "scream") would seem to be not so serious responses to the question. Putting them physically on the handout and discussing them had two effects. It showed that what the students had to say in this process was being taken seriously, and it also validated their sense of humor. It provided a light moment for the class.

The second and more crucial element of this negotiation that made it more successful was that the question of preferred reward was replaced with what reasons the students had for learning English. Of course, some students stated bluntly that they were only learning because their parents were making them attend, but I worked with them to at least figure out what they could get out of the class. A first step of negotiating the syllabus and democratizing the classroom is making sure that everyone knows why they are there and what they want out of the class. Without this, in previous classes there was no collective aim or goal for the students and myself. ULS and I were the ones setting the goals and aims of the class and I was merely attempting to fit their interests into that goal, whereas by establishing together our goals and allowing for multiplicity of reasons and goals, the class was being centered on student needs by the students themselves.

All of the interest surveys and votes were small steps that do not in-and-of themselves constitute critical pedagogy, but they were important for me in understanding what critical pedagogy and democratic classrooms could be.

Figure 16. *Compilation of survey results prepared for students, Middle H. 2011.*

Reasons for learning English

1. Speak to others/communicate – 12
2. Get a good score/get into university – 5
3. Go to the US – 3
4. Get a good job – 2
5. To watch English TV shows
6. To have fun
7. To read English books
8. Because friends are learning English

Like to do in class

1. Talk - 2
2. Play games - 2
3. Read
4. Do math
5. Read
6. Sing

Don't like to do in class

1. Write - 2
2. Study - 2
3. Sing
4. Fight
5. Tests
6. Scream

Full syllabus negotiation came a year after I began the process, but it did not happen in all of my classes. While most of my classes retained a set curriculum, usually in the form of a textbook and schedule of pages to cover, my middle school classes were left without a set curriculum. The director of the middle school program left ULS three days after being hired, in March 2012. She departed before establishing a curriculum or even purchasing textbooks, and so I was provided with an opening.

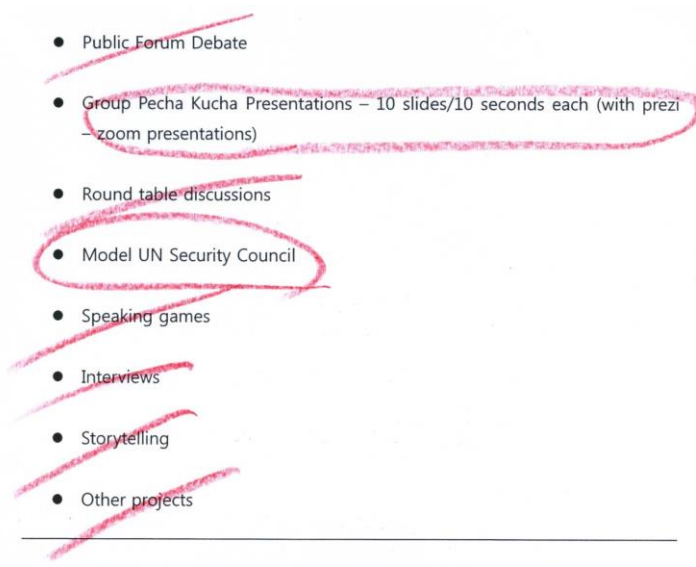
In my Middle A and Middle H class, the students and I spent the first two full days of class discussing why they were at ULS learning English and what their goals were. We discussed the things the students and I disliked about studying in general, the Korean context, and ULS. We

then worked through what we could do to change the class. The openness of these dialogues was possible because I knew many of the students before and had gained their trust as someone who would not betray their complaints to administration or their parents. I did this by sharing my own views openly and usually in agreement with their views.

Once we were able to work through why we were in the class together, what our goals were, we were able to negotiate the content of the class. Figure 17 shows a ballot for which task we would take on as the central focus of the class for our first three-month period together. The items on the ballot are a result of discussions held in class. Both of my middle school classes ended up choosing debate as their activity for the first three-month period. Middle H had done debate before and had enjoyed it. Middle A wanted to do debate because it had been previously held by ULS as a prestigious special class only for the highest level, and they wanted to tap into that prestige (I continue the story of the debates in more detail in section five).

The ballot highlights a greater attempt to expand the possibilities of what the class could be. The students contributed some of the items during our two days of discussion (speaking games, debate, and presentations). I tried to push them by making the presentations Pecha Kucha presentations (described in Figure 17), the debate a public forum style debate (which is more open and less scripted than what they had done before) and adding other possible activities. The list of activities that eventually ended up on the ballot in Figure 17 highlight my own limited ability to imagine what an EFL class could be or do in a hagwon setting. I tried though to encourage students to come up with any alternatives they could think of and left a space for them to add anything they might have been unable to think of or say during our discussions. Although the student whose ballot is shown below voted for Model UN and Pecha Kucha, the majority voted for debate, something they were comfortable and familiar with, although the topics they chose would prove to be much more provocative.

Figure 17. *Middle H class activity ballot. March 2012.*

- 
- Public Forum Debate
  - Group Pecha Kucha Presentations – 10 slides/10 seconds each (with prezi – zoom presentations)
  - Round table discussions
  - Model UN Security Council
  - Speaking games
  - Interviews
  - Storytelling
  - Other projects
- 
- 

In May 2012, three months after the previous director of middle school at ULS quit without having set a curriculum, one of the Korean teachers (my co-teacher for Middle A) was promoted to the middle school director position. As my co-teacher, she knew of the negotiated process my middle school classes were operating and was outwardly supportive. Although after her promotion she insisted that the class use a textbook going forward, she agreed to allow me to choose the textbook that Middle A would use for my class; she would choose the textbook they would use in her class (this was possible because ULS does not produce curriculum or textbooks for middle school so each individual branch must choose their own). The only stipulation was that I chose a writing textbook as my class period was supposed to focus on writing and speaking while hers was focused on reading, grammar, and listening.

I brought the possible writing textbooks to the class and we discussed how to evaluate and choose which book to use. The students were disappointed by the fact that they had to again use a textbook but were sincere in their desire to choose one that was a good fit. Figure 18 shows an example textbook evaluation from the Middle A class. As the comment on Figure 18, question five demonstrates, a lot of the focus was on aesthetics, although they were careful to not ignore content either.

Much like earlier surveys or ballots in classes, these served to mediate our discussion and give us a focus and way to talk about the books. Since I created the forms, I was ultimately the one who framed the discussion about the books based on the questions that I wrote. My



for them (what pages we were to cover in class on which days), and that we would follow the schedules.

Wolk (1998) writes of his own obstacles and the derision he faced from colleagues in running democratic classes. He mentions the stereotype, in an American context, that “serious” learning can only occur under in a highly structured, teacher-created environment (Wolk, 1998). This stereotype applies to the Korean context as well. While negotiated syllabi are linked to increasing learner motivation through involvement in even the most apolitical terms (Nation & Macalister, 2010), they are also a political tool. Simply negotiating the syllabus in an otherwise highly controlled, autocratic environment is an act of creative resistance. It is an opening of space.

Democratic teaching involves not just “doing” democracy, but reimagining democracy (Weiner, 2005). It can be transformative and resistant to the material structures of neoliberalism in the form of textbooks and corporate curriculum that limit democracy in schools. I would argue that even the examples in this section failed to radically reimagine democracy. I followed a liberal democratic model where I was, as an unelected leader, in control of the process, more often than a truly participatory democracy where the students had equal control over the process and physical control over the mediating tools of democracy (i.e., ballots). Decision making could for example have been based on principles of consensus followed by anarchist organizations in which there is greater and more intense debate about decision making, and everyone is on a more equal footing than in majority-rules democratic processes which I followed in my classes.

It takes time though, and in a neoliberal model of education where time is money, this is a major obstacle. Just as teachers might be limited initially by their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), students also need time to overcome their past experiences in school. If students have no experience with democratic learning, if the imaginary of education has been colonized, it takes time to imagine new forms of education. As critical language teachers, our job is to guide them to this new understanding, slowly if necessary, and be ourselves transformed by the process.

### ***Learner-created Materials***

In this section, I will relate my work in using learner-created materials in my classes. One of the major guidelines that Freire (2000) gives for critical pedagogy is that the materials used for learning should be learner-generated wherever possible. This fits in with having democratic



classrooms in that it further ensures that the students will be in control of their learning. This helps the class remain a problem-posing class, where the students pose their own problems and work on solving them, rather than a problem-solving class, where the problems to be solved are given by a teacher or textbook.

In March 2011, along with democratizing my classes, my other major goal was to use learner-created materials in classes wherever I felt it was possible to do so. I used learner-created materials in my Honors AP 2 class, which I have described in previous sections; however, I will focus most of this section on how I used learner-created materials in my NEK 1 class.

I first attempted critical pedagogy with my Honors AP 2 class because I knew them well, and there were openings in the curriculum because ULS was always piloting new materials with the students, meaning that there was not a set, standard curriculum. My NEK 1 class was almost the opposite. NEK 1 denotes that the students were in the first level of New English Kids program, which was one of the cheapest and lowest level programs available at ULS. The first level of NEK was the lowest language level placement (the students were 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade, ages 9 – 11) for students at ULS. The classes followed a fairly strict and strenuous curriculum using five different textbooks (homework, student, workbook, speaking and writing book, and dialogue book) for the foreign teacher class alone (additional books were covered in the Korean teacher's class).

In spite of these difficulties, I chose to attempt critical pedagogy with the NEK 1 class for a few reasons. The first reason is that they had never studied English in a hagwon before, and they had never studied with a foreign teacher before. I assumed this meant that they would be more open to trying new things because of this. My second reason for choosing to try to use learner-created materials (in addition to democratizing the class) was that although there was a fairly strict curriculum, NEK classes were a fairly low priority for ULS and so they were less stringently monitored (by a lead teacher, rather than a curriculum or program director), and if something did go wrong, it was unlikely to have severe consequences or repercussions (i.e., my being fired).

In NEK 1, I chose to replace the student book with learner-created materials. Many of the books produced by ULS used Korean characters and were specific to the local context in which students were learning, but the NEK student book did not. Many of the images in the book portrayed white, 'native speaker' children. Textbooks have been studied and critiqued extensively in terms of representation and their role in the reproduction of ideologies, social and

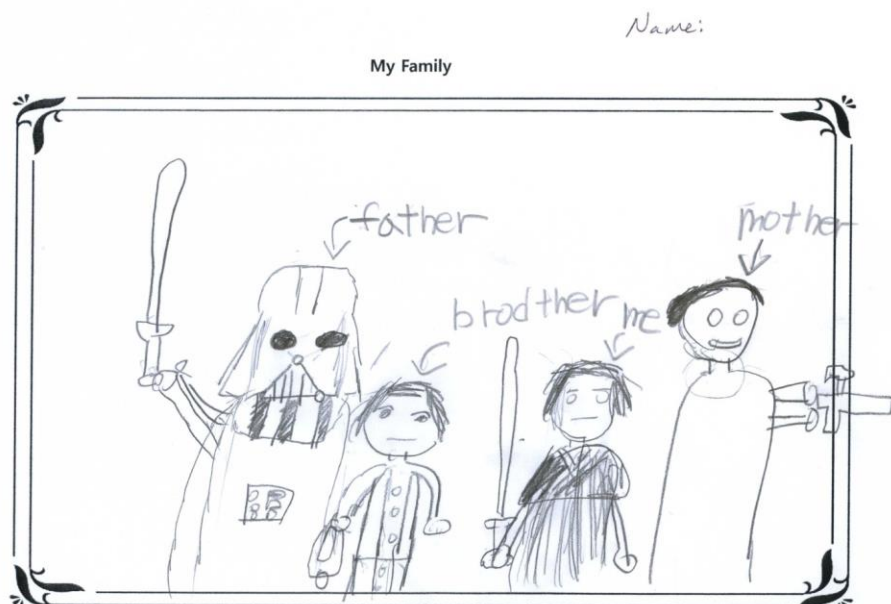
class structures (i.e., Apple, 1991; Canagarajah, 1993; Gray, 2012; Hickman & Porfilio, 2012). Following Apple's (1991) view of textbooks as socially produced objects that legitimize some knowledges over others, I look at the textbooks as material objects that are used to control knowledge production in the classroom. They are for me the accounts from which knowledge is withdrawn in banking education, and the point of learner-created materials is to return the control of the means of knowledge production to the students.

Up to the point where my NEK class covered unit two in their book (families), I had been using the required textbooks. When my class covered this section in the textbook, though, the disconnect between the books and the students became starker. It also became clear to me that the subject matter (thematic sections on family, in the classroom, etc.) could easily be produced by the students themselves. We stopped using the student book, the activity book, and the speaking and writing book after unit two, and instead the students produced their own books and other materials to cover the subject matter. We continued to use the workbook and homework books because the students had to write in these, and I was required to mark their homework with a red pen in these books. Having student writing in the book, corrected by the teacher, was one of the main ways in which parents tracked their child's progress and monitored the teacher.

Using images to elicit discussion in class was limiting because the students were focused all on one family (which was not their own and which they would potentially not relate to). It limited what they could say about the family because it was not theirs. They could not draw on their own experiences using the book. The legitimate things to say about a family are written in the book and implied in the image (i.e., "There are 12 people in the family. There is a father, a mother, a baby, and so on."). In contrast to this, Figure 19 shows a student created drawing of his own family that we used instead of this page in the textbook to discuss families.

The student produced image in Figure 20 is creative, drawing on pop culture references, and allows for a much more interesting conversation about families than the textbook. Further, all of the students had their own images to describe and use for dialogue starters. Their experiences with family were central to the lessons. They were still able to learn and practice using English vocabulary about families, but free to learn and use the vocabulary relevant to their situations and experiences rather than generalized to an idealized, culturally specific image of families as produced in textbooks.

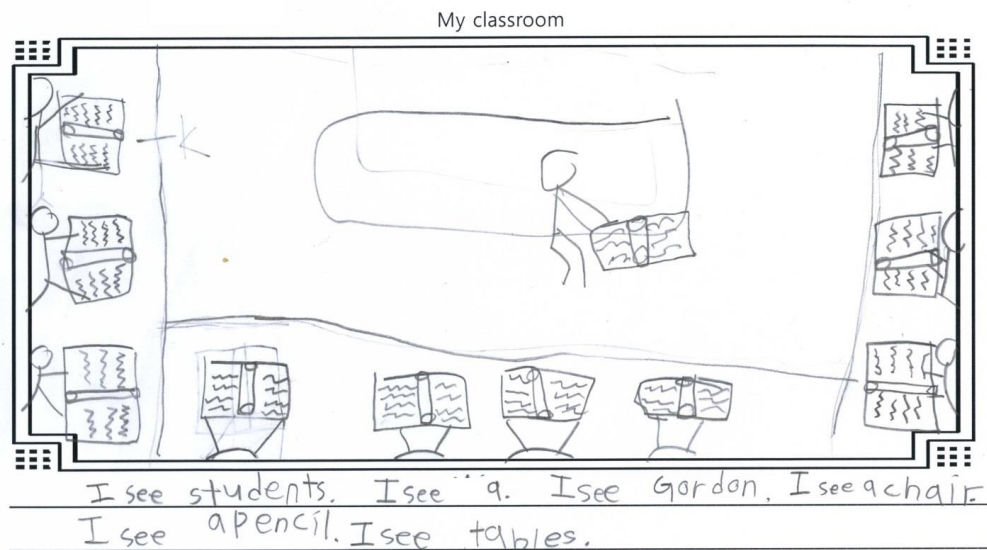
Figure 19. Student drawing of his family. NEK 1, 2011.



As with the initial student interest surveys, this move of having the young learners draw pictures and create their own materials in-and-of-itself was not critical pedagogy. This is a common practice in many classrooms, especially in places that are not resource rich enough to have textbooks. This example does serve to show that learners even at lower English language ability levels are able to create rich materials that will further their own learning.

Another important tool in critical pedagogy that is closely related to materials is the use of codes in the classroom. Codes are images or stories used in critical classrooms to start dialogues in which students can project their own experiences. Wallerstein (1983) defines five characteristics for codes: they represent a recognizable problem, they should show contradiction, they should focus on one problem only, they should not provide solutions, they should present problems small enough in scope that students can address them. Figure 20 gives an example of a student drawing produced for the NEK class that was useful as a code.

Figure 20. Student drawing of classroom. NEK 1, 2011.



In this lesson, the students were focusing on describing their classroom and drew images of our classroom at ULS to use for discussion and writing practice. While this drawing does not seem to be a code, or to present any problems, the problem is found in what has been excluded from the picture. This picture was drawn by the only fifth grade student in the class, Nicholas (pseudonyms are used). There were eleven students in the class, but Nicholas's picture shows only ten. When I noticed the space empty next to his usual seat (front row, bottom right), I asked him about it. He explained that he left out another student named Nick. Nick was a third grade student, and Nicholas did not like the fact that Nick, who was younger than he was, had the same name (they changed their names slightly after the first day so they would not both be called Nicholas in the class).

Since I asked Nicholas about the picture during the class without realizing that he had purposefully left someone out of the picture, and the rest of the class listened to his explanation, they became involved in the discussion that followed. There were two issues for Nicholas: having the same name with a person who was his junior, and the other students calling him by his name during the class instead of by a more respectful term like 형 (*hyung*, older brother). Other students protested that this was not a fair since they were using English names, not Korean names, so it did not matter if they called his name. They also did not think it was fair for Nicholas to want Nick to change his name. It was not Nicholas vs. the class since there were

some who agreed with him. My role was to moderate and make sure that the conversation stayed calm as it drifted in-between Korean and English. The end result of the dialogue was a compromise, partly brokered by me, where outside of class (i.e., on the bus) Nick would call Nicholas 형, while in the class they would call each other by their English names. I also asked if anyone would prefer to use their Korean names in class, rather than an English name. One student was already doing so, but everyone else wanted to keep their English names.

This is just one example of learner-created materials as a code in the classroom. This particular one presented the everyday problem of what to call those who are older or of a higher social status, something all of the students could relate to. It presented the contradiction of Nicholas being able to call Nick by his name but not wanting Nick to call him Nicholas. It did not present a solution to the problem, but left room for students to present their own solutions and was of a small enough scale that students were able to address the problem. While this was just a small problem, it was one that was important to the students, and one which they experienced in their everyday lives (and will be likely to continue to face situations like these). Working through the situation in a safe, collaborative environment will hopefully help them to be able to better deal with similar situations later outside of the class. Importantly, this is not something that was likely to have come up had we only used the textbook, which featured generalized images of classrooms of students.

Towards the end of the school year, in early February, the NEK 1 class made their own books using all of the drawings, dialogues, and other materials they had made over the course of the year. Figure 21 shows the cover of one student book. The name has been left on the book cover for authenticity, since the student was already using an English name that was common at ULS, so it is unlikely that the student could be identified.

I had collected and saved all of their work over the year. I brought colored paper to class and spent a class period to teaching them how to punch holes in the paper and bind the books with string, which they could then cover with another strip of colored paper. We took control of the publishing process. The books were a big source of pride for the students. After they finished them, they showed them to students in other classes, and their parents. When their parents mentioned the project to my Korean co-teacher, it was the first time anyone at ULS realized that I had been working on the project with the students, or that we had not used the NEK 1 books (except the homework and work books). Since the parents were happy, the students performed

well on level tests throughout the year, and I had a good working relationship with the NEK lead teacher, there was no problem with the learner-created materials, although I was told to use the official course textbooks more in the future.

Figure 21. Student cover for self-made English book. NEK1, February 2012.



### *Summary of Emplotment*

In writing this section and the two stories of my development toward critical pedagogy through democratizing the classroom and using learner-created materials, I used emplotment in three ways. First, I looked through my data to identify what themes I could organize a story around in terms of describing the transformation of my teaching process. I identified several based on the characteristics of critical pedagogy in Crookes (2013). In practice, the aspects of critical pedagogy described by Crookes (2013) were intertwined and not easy to isolate in clear categories and so I focused on two major focuses of my development that were the most salient to me and that seemed to organize the other aspects of critical pedagogy.

Second, I found classes that had the most complete data sets to tell the stories. My middle school classes had the most data related to the democratic process, and so I relied mostly on those classes for data in that section, although I also wanted to show at least some examples of

democratic processes in classes with younger learners. The NEK 1 class and the Honors AP 2 class had many examples of learner-created materials.

These classes also provided some of the richest data that I had in terms of complicating actions and resolutions. Additionally, I used the NEK 1 class specifically as my focus though because I wanted to show how learner-created materials can be used even with classes who may have low language proficiency. When I have discussed critical pedagogy with teachers in Korea in the past, one of the main responses I got from teachers was that critical pedagogy was impossible in their classes because of a lack of language proficiency. My inclusion of this data helps to refute those types of claims.

Finally, I rearranged the data from each class into chronological order to fit it to a plot line and highlighted moments like the unit on families in NEK that pushed me to abandon the book in favor of learner-created materials, or Nicholas's picture that ended up being a useful code. I used these small incidents along with illustrations of an ever-progressing critical practice to build to the ultimate conclusion of each story. The conclusions serve to give the main take away points of each story, namely that democratizing classroom practice is possible when it is contained within the classroom, but becomes more difficult when democratic practices must contend with more authoritarian practices at higher levels of decision making, and learner-created materials can be used to put students in control of the production of learning in the classroom. Teachers have the agency to be able to change the power structure within their own classrooms.

## CRITICAL MOMENTS

### *Introduction*

In this section, I will share stories of critical moments in three classes. The "moments" in this section are in fact of varying lengths and could equally be described as "episodes" or "events." These moments played a significant role in solidifying my identity as critical pedagogue. The first critical moment occurred near the beginning of my turn to critical pedagogy when my AP 2 class staged a protest. The second involved two of my middle school classes shortly before I left ULS, and is about the debates they staged in class. Both illustrate instances where student took action to attempt to achieve their aims and in taking such action show the possibilities for critical

pedagogy in hagwons, but the stories both also underscore the serious challenges facing critical pedagogy in such environments.

### ***The Protest***

In May 2011, the beginning of my second year as a teacher at ULS, I co-taught the honors level Advanced Placement 2 class. As I mentioned previously in section two, AP was a special program for students who had begun at our school in the kindergarten program and continued into grade school. The honors class students had begun at 5 years old, studied through three years of kindergarten, and had continued through first grade. AP 2 signifies that the students are in second grade (9 years old). They are placed into rooms according to their language level, with honors beginning in room 1, and the rest being placed in ascending room numbers based on lower levels (problematic because it both created an unhealthy atmosphere of competition where those at lower levels were unable to ascend to higher levels, and those at lower levels were stigmatized as less able to use English).

Honors students are almost exclusively those students who have studied the longest at our institute. Rarely, a student will be leveled up into the honors class, but they are generally distinguished by having done three years of kindergarten. Other students may have joined the program at 6 (2 years of kindergarten) or 7 (1 year of kindergarten) years old. Honors students are then not only generally the most able L2 communicators, but are the most valued customers of the institute, the parents having invested the most heavily in their child's education (almost \$30,000 in 2012 dollars to pay for three years of kindergarten and one year of AP classes before they reach AP 2). Students are never leveled down from honors class, except in extreme cases for the reason that leveling them down would show that the ULS curriculum was not working, which would in turn threaten the revenue stream that the student represented should her/his parents remove her/him from ULS.

The AP 2 honors class is unique from the other AP classes in that there is no Korean co-teacher for the class. It is co-taught by two foreign teachers and has a Korean manager, usually a veteran Korean teacher, to act as a liaison with the parents of the children in the class. Sometimes the Korean manager would also teach a grammar lesson once per week during one of the class times as well. This was the situation with my AP 2 class. I co-taught the class along with the head foreign teacher at the school and a Korean manager who taught grammar during



my lesson time on Mondays. There were only five students in the class at the time I was teaching it in May 2011. Others had taken a break from the institution, and one other would be leveled up into the class later that year. There were three boys and two girls in the class, all 9 years old.

May 5<sup>th</sup> is Children's Day in Korea, which is celebrated as a state holiday. Every year for Children's Day, ULS has a day of special activities and games that culminate in "Market Day" just before the Children's Day vacation. Toys, school supplies, snacks (popcorn, cotton candy, chicken nuggets, ddukkboki<sup>6</sup>, etc.) and books are laid out on tables in the gymnasium that are watched over by teachers and administrators acting as shopkeepers. Throughout the year, students collect stamps on special pages given out by teachers at the school as a reward system. Although each year there is an attempt to normalize stamp giving practices, teachers vary widely in how many stamps they give and for what reasons, and also in the reasons for which they might take stamps away from students as punishment (by crossing them out on the stamp paper with a sharpie marker, or in extreme cases throwing an entire stamp page, containing up to 100 stamps, away). The stamps can be converted into "ULS cash" in the week leading up to Market Day (one for Children's Day, and another before the Christmas holiday).

In response to the erratic stamp policies of the teachers, and in an attempt to control costs, the prices (in ULS dollars) rose for the snacks and other prizes at this Market Day. The first thing the students do when they come in off the bus is run and try to get a preview of the things that will be on sale. When they saw the prices, though, the AP 2 class was incensed at what they saw as unfair inflation.

Their first 45-minute class was taught by my co-teacher, Gina. The students told her how upset they were at the unfair prices for the market. She asked them what they would like to do about it, and as a class the students decided on a protest. They spent the class making signs (in English) that they could hold up, and then went on a march around the school. They then hung the signs on the door to the gymnasium where the market was set up. Immediately after (before I could get a picture even), the director came out of the office, took down the signs, ripped them up and threw them away. He never talked to Gina or the students, just disposed of the signs.

During my class, the students were further upset about the situation now that their signs had been destroyed. My class for them on Tuesdays and Thursdays was a writing class, and one of

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<sup>6</sup> A common street food consisting of rice cakes served in spicy red pepper paste sauce.

the units in the book covered letters of complaint, so we decided (at my suggestion) to write letters to the owner of the institution detailing their complaints about Market Day, along with suggestions for change. Three of the five students decided to actually give their letters to the owner.

What happened as a result? Not much. There was no change to that Market Day, though subsequent events did not anger students in the way that they were set up and the prizes priced. Neither I nor Gina were consulted after the protest or letters, and the students never received a response, although it is entirely possible that the parents were consulted by management without our knowing. It is maybe telling that we faced no consequences or were even called in for a meeting because of this. Customer service often trumps everything else, and with this group especially (high paying parents who had a long history with the institute and often paid for extra services), every effort was made to appease and make things appear to be going well.

Figure 22. Protest letter. AP 2 class, May 2011.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing this to complain about the Market Day

The first problem is that the things are too expensive so if we don't have many SLD dollars we can't buy many things.

The second problem is that this Market Day is more expensive than last year's Market Day. And the third problem is that gym is too small so we couldn't bring lots of toys. So please make toys cheaper and the same price. Also, if the gym is small we have to try to bring lots of toys.

Yours faithfully,

Was this a critical moment? The students are clearly not part of an oppressed group, and the protest ostensibly did little to illuminate what could be seen as a more systemic problem (that “cash” is a reward for studying, it is used to create a competitive atmosphere, and that it is

unequally and even unfairly distributed at that). First, it is perfectly reasonable and necessary to practice critical pedagogy with students from privileged groups (Vandrick, 2009). There are multiple sites of oppression, beyond class, such as gender, sexual identity, race, and so on that critical pedagogy can address (Crookes, 2013). As Cowhey (2005) points out, children have a keen sense of fairness, and teaching them strategies to deal with unfairness in responsible and effective ways (i.e., writing letters and protesting, rather than having displaced anger and acting out in class), and especially when those strategies involve using English as a tool for communication, it is a valid classroom exercise. In this instance, using English was the more effective choice for communicating in their letters and protest since it emphasized their identity as “good students” to the administration while demanding change. The fact that nothing happened as a result was a lesson in and of itself in the difficulty of demanding change when you have no power.

This moment did not obviously help the students to problematize the commodification of learning through “cash” rewards and toys for studying. This is something I’ve thought about since then, but at that point in my evolution as a teacher, it was not something that I thought to guide them towards in discussions. Later in my teaching I did attempt to discuss this when issues of stamps came up in class, as they often did, usually relating to what the students saw as unfair practices in stamp giving by teachers. I never seemed to handle these discussions well though, and don’t feel confident in my success in opening their view of the problem to a systemic level beyond what they saw as immediate problems. These could be seen as missed opportunities to get students to think about what the commodification of their own learning means, but collectively, they were at least opportunities for me to learn so that I might be better able to handle those conversations now, and to help other teachers understand how they might better handle those conversations. It is the critical teacher’s responsibility to challenge students in dialogue.

### ***The Debates***

As I mentioned in section four, in March 2012, ULS was left without a middle school director, textbooks, or any curriculum. This provided an opening for the students and me to negotiate the curriculum more completely than I had been able to do previously. We negotiated the goals, which were generally to improve the students’ spontaneous speaking ability (as

opposed to the usual focus on presentations for speaking practice) and writing abilities. We also negotiated the activity and materials. Both classes chose to do debate for the first three-month quarter of the school year.

The students then chose the topics of their debates. Middle A chose to debate whether or not homework should be abolished. Middle H chose to debate the relevance of private education and whether or not it should be abolished. The topics of the debates highlighted things in their lives that they deemed to be severe and immediate problems: too much homework, and too much time in school due to competition furthered by private afterschool education. The fact that they were debates also highlighted the conflicting views the students had on these subjects and also their desire not to be seen too readily by other teachers at the school or their parents as openly in defiance of the system. They wanted to fight, but in a way that seemed balanced and which they thought would be the most legitimate form of argument. In this, debate was a shrewd choice. My role then was to guide them through the process and rules of debate, research, and help keep the class on a schedule to complete tasks in a timely fashion. I was also a language resource, helping the students with the language they would need to debate.

We began with brainstorming sessions in each class. Figures 24 and 25 show notes from two students as they brainstormed pro and con arguments to private education. The definition of private education was broadened by the students in Middle H to include all forms of private education. I also helped them to do this in class by mentioning that there were other forms of private schools, like the Catholic school near where I grew up in the U.S. Students thought of more examples and researched others on their smartphones. While they discussed openly in class the problems of hagwons specifically, they did not want to make hagwons the focus of their arguments in a debate that could be public<sup>7</sup>. The students worked together in pairs or threes to brainstorm ideas. They used their dictionaries and internet on their smart phones to help them compile their lists.

The notes detail some sophisticated positions on equality and rights. There is consideration given to private religious schools in Figure 24. There is also a focus on economic inequality and the role that private education can play in furthering that inequality in both sets of notes. This shows that the students were aware of and able to critique larger societal problems

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<sup>7</sup> ULS often had upper elementary and middle school classes perform speeches or presentations in the auditorium at the end of a three-month quarter for other classes and occasionally for parents as well.

related to private education. They made connections between their own situation and experiences as beneficiaries of private English and other education (almost all Middle H students were enrolled in multiple hagwons for math, science, art, or other subjects besides attending ULS on Tuesdays and Thursdays to learn English).

Figure 23. Notes for and against private education #1. Middle H, March 2012.

Private	Arguments	Public
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Private education gives high quality education.</li> <li>* They have a right and an opportunity educated in private.</li> <li>* Private school isn't about rich vs poor problem.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Public school <sup>students</sup> can become a lawyer, doctor, writer or anything else.</li> <li>* Private schools contribute to class divisions.</li> <li>* They should be equal, why treat people different because of the wealth.</li> <li>* Public school for not wealthy children should be available.</li> </ul>	

Figure 24. Notes for and against private education #2. Middle H, March 2012.

Arguments	
<p>Private</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people like private school.</li> <li>• To take away private schools would take away someone's religious freedoms.</li> <li>• private schools have an advantage in terms of moral standards and academic achievement.</li> <li>• No one should be denied the opportunity to learn more.</li> <li>• It doesn't matter where we learn from.</li> </ul>	<p>Public</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life should not be based on money.</li> <li>• It's unfair just because a child's parents have more money, that child should have special treatment.</li> <li>• Private education is detrimental to the whole system.</li> <li>• Private schooling creates differences among the students.</li> <li>• Private is just a riskier financial decision is all.</li> </ul>

The next step for students was to break into pro/con teams. Middle H had six students, so they were in groups of three. Middle A had nine students, so they broke up into groups of four and five. Each group was randomly assigned a side, pro or con, for their topic by drawing straws. The next stage of learning in the class was research. Each team used the computer lab to look up evidence to support their case. They created evidence cards for each topic with a source that they found online (as seen in Figure 24, an evidence card created by the anti-homework team in Middle A). To make the evidence cards, they printed articles and then physically cut the sections of the article that were relevant to their own arguments and then glued them to a card with rudimentary citations.

My role during this was to advise and serve as a language resource when students needed help. I helped them to find evidence on occasion. They were free to collect evidence in Korean, although strongly encouraged to use English language resources. Since their level of English was generally high, most of them attempted to find sources from American or British newspapers online or websites that were devoted to debate that I shared with them as resources<sup>8</sup>. Figure 25 shows sources being used from the New York Times (in an editorial), and from a debate website.

<sup>8</sup> i.e., <http://www.procon.org/> and <http://www.forandagainst.com/>

Figure 25. Anti-homework evidence card. Middle A, April 2012.

④ @rticles

3. Teens are even busier.

Many teenagers are involved in the same kinds of activities as their younger siblings, but they may also be involved in school activities like band, drama, debate club, etc. Some teens play school sports as well as league sports. And on top of everything, some teens have jobs. Many of the teens who don't do school activities, work a job after school every day.

Top 3 reasons why homework should be banned.

**I Hate Homework. I Assign It Anyway.**

By JESSICA LAHEY

Teachers don't like giving homework.

I hate — *hate* — homework.

I hated homework when I was a student, I hate the battle of wills I have with my second-grader and I hate seeing my middle-school-age son miss out on the afternoons of his childhood.

But most of all, I hate being a hypocrite. So it's time to come clean: I am a teacher, and I assign homework.

I have always assigned homework because that is what teachers do; if I didn't, word would get around that I am a pushover, or don't care enough about my students to engage their every waking moment with academics. When I first started teaching, I assigned homework liberally and without question, and scoffed at my students' complaints about their workload. I expected them to keep quiet, buck up and let me do my job.

The popular media tempest surrounding homework formed in 2006 with the publication of two books on the subject: "The Homework Myth," by Alfie Kohn, and "The Case Against Homework," by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, followed by Time Magazine's *The Myth About Homework* by Claudia Wallis. Last year, Vicki Abeles's documentary "Race to Nowhere" joined the fray. In her film, Ms. Abeles claims that today's untenable and increasing homework load drives students to cheating, mental illness and suicide.

I was nervous during this phase of the project because working in the computer lab/auditorium left my class much more exposed and open to scrutiny than we were inside our classroom. To get from the teachers' work room to classrooms or the ULS reception area, people would have to pass through the auditorium, which was located just outside the teachers' work room. Space was limited in the buildings, resulting in the auditorium doubling as both the computer room and gymnasium. The ULS afternoon school director (second in authority only after the owner of ULS, in charge of classes for all students from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through middle school) also had her desk in the front of the teachers' room, where she could look out the door into the auditorium. This made me nervous because I was not conducting the class as other teachers according to the ULS ideal for teachers.

The ideal classroom for ULS administration was one in which the teacher was constantly in control. This was conveyed in initial training, which consisted of observing other teachers for one week, and in the irregularly scheduled teacher's meetings. Specifically, it was mentioned in meetings to make sure our classes looked to be studying rather than playing games on CCTV. The implication of studying was an image of students seated with books open and a teacher at the front of the class by the white board or circling to check students' work. In the computer lab, I was going between groups and often letting them do their own research without strict guidance. I was letting them use Korean sources. They were also using Korean to speak to each other, which happened in every class despite the strict 'English only' policy set by ULS. Translanguaging (Garcia, 2009), or using all available linguistic resources to complete a task, was not an accepted practice at ULS. During the research phase, the students were speaking Korean, and I was not directing the class, but rather giving advice and help where it was needed.

The afternoon program director asked me after the first class (with Middle A) what we were working on. When I explained the debate, she was excited and decided that Middle A would do the debate in front of all the students in the middle school program in May (at the end of the three-month quarter). After having brought each class (Middle A and H) to the auditorium three class periods in a row, however, she suggested to me that I should not use the computer lab too much and it would be better to have the class in the classroom. She did not mention a reason, but I did not feel at the time that she was skeptical of what we were doing or even paying much attention to the class. Part of the opening created by the sudden departure of the middle school director was that it left other administrators busy with extra work on top of their already packed schedules so they did not spend much time overseeing the teachers' classes during that time.

After her suggestion to move to the classroom, though, I spent alternate periods in the computer lab and in the classroom. In the classroom, I worked with the students on the skills they would need for debating including taking notes on a flow sheet (a special note sheet used in debate to help track arguments) as someone was giving their opening speech. We practiced unscripted rebuttals and question/answer periods between teams and individuals. In teaching this, I found instructional materials online, created materials, and drew on my experiences in high school debate. I shared with the class how my experiences in high school debate had helped me when I wrote editorials and gave a speech at the school board meeting to help prevent the closing of my high school German program.



The Middle A class was the first to debate in May in front of all the other assembled middle school and pre-middle classes. Figure 27 shows an example of the opening speech for the anti-homework team in the Middle A debate.

Figure 26. *Anti-homework opening speech. Middle A, May 2012.*

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today we are debating the resolution, "Homework is not necessary" We on the negative team strongly support this resolution. We have four reasons: Homework causes stress, It's better to save trees, and We don't have to spend almost time during the day.

Our first point is Homework causes stress. We want to play more, but the teacher gives us homework. So we have a lot of stress.

Our second point is It's better to save trees. We waste a lot of paper. When we do the homework we don't do it carefully, so it is not helpful.

Our third point is We don't have to spend almost time during the day. We want a lot of free time in the day. But we have homework. Homework eats our time. Homework is a bad thing.

In conclusion, we have talked about It's better to save trees, and We don't have to spend almost time during the day. We have shown that Homework is not necessary. For these reasons, we beg to oppose.

The opening speeches were followed by unscripted rebuttals, question and answer periods, counter-arguments, and final summaries and closing statements. Only the opening speeches were scripted with the rest being spontaneous responses. To judge the debate, a panel of teachers and administrators, including the afternoon program director, was assembled. It was a success with teachers and administrators happy, and the students feeling confident. I do not remember and did not record who won because that was never the point for me, but also because of what happened after the debate.

The point of the debate, for the students of Middle A, was to learn how to better articulate their case against homework to the hagwon Korean teachers, administrators, and their parents. During the three-month period of the debate, I did not give homework to Middle A or H, having heard Middle A's accounts of staying up past midnight many nights trying to finish homework

and study for tests not only for all of their public-school classes, but also for their hagwon classes. Their very specific goal for ULS was to end the daily vocabulary quizzes that were given every class by my co-teacher. An example of one was shared in section three (Figure 9). If they did not score 80% or higher, they were given detention to stay at ULS and study the vocabulary they missed until 10:00 pm under the supervision of a Korean teacher.

Just after the debate, the students went back to class for their next period with my co-teacher. She gave them a vocabulary test that none of them had studied for. It was and remains unclear to me even after talking to the students if she purposefully gave a different test than the one they studied for, although it seems more likely that she gave them the scheduled test and either the students had not expected a quiz on this irregular day when they had a debate or if they collectively planned to fail the quiz on purpose. In any case, the entire class failed and was given detention. One of the students left class to find me in the teachers' room to ask me to talk to the teacher. When I spoke to her after the class she was unmoved by any of my arguments or pleas not to give them detention, especially after the debate had gone so well. The afternoon school program director was similarly unmoved. Teachers finished at 9:00, but I stayed until 10:00 with them.

The next day was the Middle H debate. The afternoon school director had us hold the debate in a classroom, in front of just one other class, Middle D, the lowest level class that had only three students, as our audience rather than having it in the auditorium. She did not give any reasons, but I assume she did not like the topic of whether or not private education should be abolished, and also she wanted to avoid the type of confrontation that had occurred after the Middle A debate.

Shortly after the detention of the Middle A class was when the director of middle school refused to let my students use the writing textbook we had chosen. My advice to my students was to leave ULS if they could convince their parents to let them, or to at least try to convince their parents to let them take a break from hagwons. I left ULS at the end of that month. I left on good terms with most of the administration, except the middle school director. My classes were handed off to a friend of mine who had worked at ULS with me previously before taking time off. By July 2012, he informed me on Facebook that all the students in Middle H had left ULS (for various reasons), and that almost all Middle A students had either transferred to other classes or also left ULS.

I feel conflicted about the debates in retrospect, particularly the timing of them at the end of my time at ULS. The conditions that allowed the debates could only have happened during that time of March 2012 – May 2012 when we had no curriculum to follow and greater freedom in our classes. Also, having taught the students for so long at that point, I had the rapport needed to have meaningful dialogues and debates in class. I feel guilty for not having been able to do more to help them get rid of the vocabulary test or at least to not have had detention that night. I made a point to talk to the owner of ULS and she told me that the only reason ULS was giving the vocabulary quizzes was that every other English hagwon in the area was also giving them and that parents liked them because they could see how many words their children were learning. She felt if ULS did not give the tests, parents would put their children in another school.

My hope is that the students left that experience more determined and more confident to fight injustice in their own lives and to fight injustice they see in society as they grow up. Cowhey (2005) writes of hearing other teachers talk about her former students who are in their classes as the ones who are passionate about social justice. I am hopeful that this is true for Middle A and H, although I also know that I was just one of many teachers they had at the time and there were many other teachers before and after me. As critical pedagogues (and teachers in general) it is important to remember that although the scope of what we do and any influence we may have is limited, its full effect is often not visible at the time and may in fact take years to bear full fruit, when the conditions are ripe. Also, we, teachers, are not likely to be the sole factor promoting criticality that students have. Ultimately though, as long as there is a chance of expanding students' imaginings of what is possible or lighting a desire in students to take action against injustice, then critical language teachers should keep using critical pedagogy.

### ***Summary of Emplotment***

In this section, I used materials from my AP 2 and Middle A and H classes along with my recollection of events to tell two stories of events during different phases of my evolution towards critical pedagogy. To check some of the details in the first story about my AP 2 class, I interviewed Gina, my co-teacher who was with the students when they first formulated the plan to protest. I remember vividly the students in class that day when we wrote the letters together but had not been there when they hatched the plan. I used Gina's memories to supplement my

own through the interview to help bring together and check my memory of what happened that day.

For the Middle A and H classes, I watched videos of the students' debates and videos of me teaching them in class to help me remember, along with looking through all of their notes and the debate materials that they created. These helped me remember the events of those last three months teaching them at ULS. It especially helped me to remember the individual students in the classes, although in the stories I gave above, I chose to refer to the classes as cohesive groups rather than as groups of individuals. I did that because I could not remember specific individual actions, but also because their actions collectively, what we went through together, was more important to the story than what they each did as individuals.

To tell these stories, I isolated the action in the classes and simplified the story lines. I limited my telling of the stories to a specific time frame in order to tell the narrative and left out what did not help story for each. I also chose to juxtapose these two shorter narratives for a reason. Both show the very real possibilities of critical pedagogy leading to student action in hagwon settings, but they both also let me tell the story of how action is not always successful or easy. This is not to present critical pedagogy as a failure, but to show where I had difficulties so that others who are interested in doing something similar can have realistic expectations and prepare themselves accordingly. Also, they can avoid some of the things I realized were less useful as steps in the process, such as attempting to create a representative-style democracy where the teacher still holds near total control, when a participatory democracy is possible and more appropriate for critical pedagogy.

## **REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Introduction***

In this final section, I will bring together the elements of the various narratives that have been told about student resistance, evolution towards critical pedagogy, and critical moments to examine how they answer the research questions posed in section two. In discussing the process of this study and how it answers the questions about the feasibility and necessity of critical pedagogy in hagwons, I will also outline the limitations of my work and lay out a call for action.

The three questions were: a) can critical pedagogy be done in neoliberal spaces, if so, b) is it desirable, and c) what is an appropriate methodology of inquiry for a critical teacher in a hagwon?

### *Can Critical Pedagogy be done in Neoliberal Spaces?*

In writing the narratives of my evolution in practicing critical pedagogy through democratizing the classroom, using learner-created materials, and the stories of critical moments, I show that critical pedagogy within neoliberal spaces, specifically English language hagwons, is possible. There were specific conditions that allowed me to do critical pedagogy at ULS, which allowed me to create space within my classroom. By theorizing my experience, I can draw out the lessons I learned that would be useful for other teachers interested in using critical pedagogy in similar situations so that they might be able to create their own spaces for critical practice.

First, it is important to start slow and build your practice as you build rapport and relationships with the administration, other teachers, students, and their families. This is key to being able to create space in your own classroom. It is impossible to practice critical pedagogy without understanding the context (at all levels: socio-political, school-level, and student backgrounds) in which you are teaching because critical pedagogy is context-dependent. The ways in which it is practiced vary depending on the needs of the students in response to the context. In taking time to learn about the context, a period of listening, you are able to establish relationships that will help your practice.

I started teaching at ULS in 2009 but was not able to begin to practice critical pedagogy until 2011, and even then was only comfortable making small interventions as I discussed in section four. Finally, by late 2011 and early 2012, I was comfortable enough to more fully embrace critical pedagogy and transform my practice. It is important to not only understand the context and build relationships, but also to start slowly and cautiously, especially in neoliberal settings where teachers are typically less secure in their employment (i.e., no unions, no real counter-weight to the employer's power over employees).

I found that generally, administration and co-teachers have no problem with the mechanisms of problem-posing education because it is generally just good pedagogy that shares a lot in common with communicative language teaching that is being promoted in Korea right now. Pushback may come on the topics of discussion or some of the student-led projects that the class undertakes. In these instances, such as when the Middle H class was not allowed to hold their

debate about whether or not private education should be abolished, the limits of critical pedagogy are clearly shown. The space of the classroom may be changed to allow for critical pedagogy, and the material conditions needed can be carved out and isolated from administrative control, but critical pedagogy is ultimately action oriented and requires interaction with a community outside of the singular classroom. I do not think that this is impossible in hagwon settings, but it is more difficult to try and subvert the control of administrators and curriculum on a larger scale, and I, along with my students, had limited success in these situations.

### *Using Materialist Narrative Analysis*

Using a materialist narrative analysis has allowed me to tell the stories that answer my research questions. Starting with a narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) allowed me to theorize my evolution toward critical pedagogy through emplotment of my data into narratives. These narratives present alternatives for other teachers who may not imagine that this type of teaching is possible in hagwons. In this way, these narratives serve to counter mainstream narratives on what English language teaching is or should be in Korean hagwons (Richie & Wilson, 2000).

I use narratives in the plural because in my analysis, multiple inter-related narratives emerged. The smaller narratives of student resistance, democratizing classes, using learner-created materials, and the critical moments all stand on their own, but when brought together, they tell the larger story of my development as a critical pedagogue. Polkinghorne (1995) notes that while fiction stories may have a single unified plot line, non-fiction stories often have multiple plot lines that are only partially integrated into the whole. The frictions inherent in transforming real experiences into storied experiences create fissures. The lessons that I am able to draw from my past experiences through narrative analysis were not always lessons that I learned from even as I experienced them.

The materialist analysis that I embedded into the narrative analysis came out of a realization that in order to fully theorize my practice, I needed a way to theorize the material world and objects that served as my data. My data for this study are not the traditional data used in narrative studies, which tend to already be narrative in nature. This layering of analysis led to tensions that altered the structure of the stories I tell. Looking at student resistance, for instance, required more

of materialist view to understand in what ways the students were able to resist, whereas the critical moments relied less on a materialist analysis to theorize the experience.

Using the materialist analysis allowed me to theorize how students resisted the material conditions of their learning at the hagwon (long hours in the classroom, daily tests, curriculum they did not like, etc.) and it also helped me to theorize how democratizing the classroom can change the relations of power to alter the material reality of the classroom. I was also able to examine how the material objects used in classes related to the control over the production of knowledge in class. Learner-created materials subverted the understanding at ULS that knowledge of English language comes from the textbooks and ULS curriculum. Material objects also had a role in mediating the democratizing of classrooms. By offering multiple modes of participation (beyond just spoken discussion) and greater anonymity, physical ballots or written surveys allowed for students to more fully participate.

### *Hagwons as a Site of Struggle*

I have so far shown that critical pedagogy is possible in hagwons using materialist narrative analysis to theorize and present my own practice. Now I turn to the question of whether or not critical pedagogy is desirable in hagwons. Should it be done and does it make a difference? These are really the questions at the heart of my paper and my own practice. Of course, to practice critical pedagogy, I must believe that it should be done and that it does ultimately make a difference. In this section, I will outline my thoughts on why I believe so by addressing some ethical concerns related to whether or not critical pedagogy should be done in hagwons, as well as addressing the question of what social justice is in a hagwon setting (if fighting for social justice is the ultimate aim of critical pedagogy). Finally, I take up the question of what kind of difference critical pedagogy can make in a hagwon context.

In discussing critical pedagogy in my teaching, I have been repeatedly questioned about the ethics of this sort of teaching, both with k-8 students, and as an American in Korea. Crookes (2013) calls this the “imposition” question, whereby one’s actions are called into question on the assumption that doing this type of work necessarily involves imposing your world view on your students. This is a false assumption made by those who have little experience with critical pedagogy and may simply disguise a basic hostility to the entire project. This assumption is also reached under the wrong belief that teaching is a neutral process. Teaching, and education in

general, is a highly political process. Not acknowledging this is dangerous because it can serve to preserve and reify repressive structures in the status quo. Critical pedagogy is in this sense the more ethical choice because it acknowledges the explicitly political nature of education and the stance of the teacher is made clear rather than obscured.

Critical pedagogy is always self-reflective and responsive to context. It is open and ethics are “worked out locally through intertextual, intersubjective public discourse” (Hardin, 2001, p. 75). Processes are explicitly discussed in classes, and with students often playing a major role in the decision making process, imposition is less likely than in the autocratic, banking style of education. While critical pedagogy is action oriented, the action is dialogically decided and driven by the students who become the authors of their own emancipation (however small scale it may be).

Many teachers can also be sympathetic to the fact that students have agency and are sometimes willing and able to vigorously resist that which they do not agree with. The images of resistance in this study and the numerous examples found in the literature on teaching prove that students are not passive, empty vessels who are filled with everything the teacher gives them. They have their own values and ideologies in a world in which the teacher is only one of many different sources of input. Parents and families, as well as the students’ own lived experiences, help them construct their worlds; teachers, and especially language teachers, play a small role in that process. That is not to say that it is an unimportant role.

There are those who say that by practicing critical pedagogy in neoliberal spaces such as private language institutes, we are legitimizing those spaces. Lipman (2009) warns of this legitimization at the cost of a larger fight for public education. Bray and Kwo (2013) also conclude in their study that neoliberal forms of “shadow education” ultimately undermine public education and lead to the exclusion of the economically disadvantaged from free and equal educational opportunities. The undermining of public education is an urgent concern. While it can be argued that by participating in the system we are legitimizing it, there remains no large movement to be found for reimagining the system.

Anyon (1997) argues in her study of an urban school in New Jersey that ultimately, to get rid of “ghetto schools” we must eliminate poverty. In Korea, English language serves as a gatekeeping mechanism to both universities and employment through testing requirements. In order to eliminate the inequalities of this system, there needs to be a movement for broader



change. Simply removing English language requirements alone is not enough to address the inequalities that are exacerbated by the hagwon system in Korea. Hagwons, as they exist now are almost a perfect embodiment of neoliberal education policy. They are loosely regulated, operate strictly according to market principles through which students get the education they can afford, rather than according to a right to education principle whereby all students are guaranteed an equal opportunity to education, and run on a labor source (teachers) that has been thoroughly casualized, rather than having teachers with strong credentials represented by a union. The underlying neoliberal ideology driving competition through the commodification of education as expressed through policies as large as national language testing, and as small as the ULS cash reward system, need to be changed. For this change to happen, teachers and practitioners at all levels need to be engaged in the process, even at the lowest level by starting dialogues and creating spaces for new imaginings of what the world can be and actions to be taken to better the world. There is no imminent revolution for education in Korea (or elsewhere for that matter). Ruffo et al. (2008), writing about education reform worldwide, instead state that “changing the distribution of power within education systems may be a matter of shifting complex balances rather than large-scale reversals of existing patterns” (2008, p. 54). In other words, we need to keep working bit-by-bit for small scale changes that will eventually add up to larger change. Hagwons cannot be written off as illegitimate locations for this daily struggle for change for two reasons: they are where the privileged, who are likely to be the future policy makers, are located; and the hagwon system is so large at this point, with 80% of Korean children attending hagwons (Byun & Kim, 2010), that they simply cannot be ignored.

For me, this is how the fight for social justice can be fought in hagwons using critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy alters the balance of power in the classroom and helps students imagine alternatives to current problems. It localizes power and builds communities within classrooms that can be scaled up. It allows us to be “situationists” (CrimethInk Ex-workers’ Collective, 2007), to create space for change wherever we are. Our classrooms are never isolated from what is happening in the outside world and critical pedagogy seeks to explicitly make the connection between classroom practice and the broader community. It is in the daily practices of critical pedagogy that change is possible.

It cannot be ignored however that teaching in spaces like hagwons creates a tension for critical pedagogues. Critical pedagogy is more than just a set of practices such as using learner-

created materials or democratizing the classroom. It is motivated and driven by a belief that education and educators have a responsibility to work for changes to correct injustices and inequalities in the world. It was a deep contradiction for me to work and make my living teaching in a hagwon, an institution that harms both the individual students (through overworking cf. Do, 2014; Kang et al., 2014) and society by deepening inequality through restricted access to linguistic capital. This contradiction is a condition of life however in today's world where neoliberalism has become firmly entrenched. The reason that living this contradiction became possible for me was because hagwons are still human places. As a teacher, I could not but want to help my students grow, both as English users and more broadly. I also formed close relationships with my coworkers. Hope for change also comes from the fact that these are human spaces where people exist with empathy and a capacity for change.

### *Constraints of Hagwons*

While hagwons offer possibilities for critical pedagogy and are a necessary location for critical pedagogy, the constraints they present also cannot be dismissed. Not only are the material conditions of hagwon learning difficult for students, but the conditions of work for teachers are also challenging.

One of the big challenges for foreign teachers is that hagwons control the teachers' work visas, which means that teachers cannot change jobs without the hagwon's permission, and also if they quit their job at the hagwon, they forfeit their right to residency in Korea. Under these conditions, teachers may be less willing to take risks that could jeopardize their employment and life in Korea. It is significant that my growing engagement with critical pedagogy coincided with obtaining my permanent residency (through marriage), which meant that my residency in Korea was no longer contingent on my employment. The hagwons still exercise power over teachers though through housing. Foreign teachers are given free housing in Korea, which also means that if they leave their job, they are forced to leave their apartment, the problems of which are compounded in Korea where deposits typically require sizable sums of cash or credit to secure new housing.

It is also true that many of the foreign teachers saw themselves as only temporary residents in Korea. Very few of the foreign teachers at ULS intended to live in Korea long term, and none had plans to attempt to gain Korean citizenship, even if they were married to Korean nationals.

This temporary status is another reason why foreign teachers specifically may not have been invested in changing or even challenging the hagwon system.

For Korean teachers, hagwon teaching is no less stable. There are no unions to represent hagwon teachers. Teachers typically have one-year contracts and can be fired at will by administration. At ULS, as was typical of other hagwons, Korean teachers are offered no pension. Hagwon teachers teach more contact hours for less pay than do public school teachers. Accordingly, it is rare for both foreign and Korean teachers to make a career of teaching at hagwons, let alone at a specific hagwon.

These conditions, the long working hours, ubiquitous surveillance (with CCTV cameras in every classroom), and the overwhelming power of the employer over employees make hagwons a difficult place to practice critical pedagogy, let alone research critical pedagogy or teacher practices. In these conditions, participatory action research is nearly impossible. Critical practitioner research, however, can be done under these extreme conditions and offers critical pedagogues an alternative research methodology.

Critical practitioner research is a useful methodology to adopt when research and practice undermines the authority of administration and may not be tolerated for that reason. Teachers working with younger children also may not be able to carry out participatory action research projects with those children in hagwons. Even in cases where the research is participatory with young learners, the reporting is necessarily carried out by the teacher, and ultimately, the teacher's voice overpowers the children's. Critical practitioner research is more sensitive to this reality.

### ***Call for Action and Conclusion***

Although the constraints and challenges are numerous, it is important for critical pedagogues in hagwons and other similar neoliberal education settings to continue working on finding ways to carry out critical pedagogy, research, and reporting on their work. With these data and projects, I have presented at two conferences in Korea, conducted one small teacher training at ULS during the weekly teachers' meeting, and was invited to conduct a three-hour training seminar with a colleague at ULS on the day after my formal employment as a teacher there ended. This is significant because despite all of the setbacks my classes and I faced when doing critical pedagogy (textbook choice not being honored, detention for students after the debate, the protest

that failed to make any change), I was still able to get the support of the administration, who liked my critical work because the students liked it (and in turn the parents were happy because their children were enjoying class).

I have tried to get hagwon teachers that I know involved with professional organizations like TESOL (Korea TESOL) or KATE (which has a critical pedagogy interest section). It is important to continue reaching out to foreign and Korean hagwon teachers. Foreign hagwon teachers especially are hired with little or no formal training, and therefore may have no idea about critical pedagogy. Korean teachers with training may not have ever had training in critical pedagogy. Training alone does not make a critical pedagogue, but hagwon teachers especially as marginalized workers in difficult jobs with low benefits have stake in the fight for changing the system.

It should be clear that both critical pedagogy and critical practitioner research cannot be rigidly defined by sets of principles or characteristics, though those can be used as loose guidelines for development. It must be contextualized to the situation. It is not about one critical pedagogy, but multitudes of critical pedagogies. It is about your critical pedagogy formed in concert with your class. Concepts of critical practitioner research are the same. They must be developed to fit the needs of the situation and their legitimacy rests with their usefulness to the class.

Despite my commitment to this type of practice, no two of my classes were ever the same, nor can they ever be the same when you do critical pedagogy, because you are not fully in charge of shaping the class. This in a sense is why it is so hard for teacher educators and other teachers to describe critical pedagogy in a way that other teachers might be able to pick up and use, like a set of tools or decontextualized methods that will magically adjust and fit to different situations. It is something that needs to be evolved into. It depends on relationships and trust. It takes time and is often difficult, and emancipation is often delayed or on a smaller scale than you might hope for. In spite of these challenges, it is important for critical work to be carried out in all educational contexts. To not practice critical pedagogy would be to give in, to accept the status quo, when a better world is possible.

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