Investigation of English Program in Korea: Focusing on the possibility of VR use in orientation and training programs

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Abstract: The introduction of the communicative approach in the English language education brings in a Korean the English Program in Korea (EPIK), which is a Korean government sponsored program established 1995. by the Korean Ministry of Education improve Korean students’ and teachers’ communicative competency in English within the public school system in Korea. For this goal, EPIK invites English speakers from 7 major English-speaking countries. However, the effectiveness of this program has been questioned in Korea. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the current status, problems, and the directions for the program to be aimed at, and for the effectiveness of EPIK through investigation of the program. Then this paper presents some possible solutions and suggestions including the possibility of VR use in orientation and training programs in order to empower both Korean teachers of English and English native teachers in Korea.

Key Words: English program in Korea, English education, Education policy, Native English speaker, VR

1. Introduction

The communicative approach in English-language education has been mandated in the public school system since 1992 by the Ministry of Education[1]. This was a major shift from previous English curricula which mainly emphasized “the audio-lingual method and the grammar-translation method”[2, p. 682] in secondary schools in Korea. Since then,
research has examined the shift in focus of these English-language education programs in Korea to shed light on the effectiveness of the shift as well as to learn about the students’ and their teachers’ needs[3]. Research has also been conducted to identify the most beneficial approaches to teaching English[4].

The introduction of the communicative approach in English-language education in Korea brought in two principal movements in the field of English language teaching and learning. The first one was the adoption of teaching English through English, which means that the main language of instruction in English language classes should only be English. The second movement, which is the major focus of this investigation, was the introduction of English native speakers through the EPIK (i.e., English program in Korea, henceforth EPIK) which aimed at the enhancement of the Korean students’ communicative abilities in their English education. Therefore, the current status, problems, the directions for the program to be aimed at, and suggestions for the effectiveness of EPIK are investigated in this paper for the students and teachers in Korea to find ways to improve their communicative competence in English. For the effectiveness of EPIK, this program is compared with one similar program, JET(Japan exchange and teaching program) in Japan. In this paper, the desirable ways to improve the strengths of Korean teachers of English and recognize their duty as non-native English speaking teachers are sought. In accordance with empowering Korean teachers of English, recommendations for empowering English native speakers in this program as teachers of English in partnership with English teachers in Korea, schools, and Korean government are made. This study is different from previous studies, which focus on the lack of orientation programs for foreign teachers, in that it proposes the possibility of utilizing VR technology for strengthening online pre-orientation and main-orientation in EPIK.

1.1 Policy Changes in Korean English Education

The first official introduction of English language to Korea was made in 1883 and the Grammar Translation method had been considered a major way of English education until the 1990s[5]. After that, Korean government recognized that a high level of English oral proficiency should be achieved in order for Koreans to survive in this global competition[5,6]. This recognition, in fact, greatly influenced the introduction of the communicative approach in English language education to a great extent through the 6th and 7th National Curricula in English[2]. Furthermore, the revised National English Curricula in 2015 also put emphasis on the Korean students’ improvement of communicative competency to become competent in the global world especially[6].

1.2 English Program in Korea (EPIK)

EPIK was started in 1996 and invited native English speakers from 7 major English-speaking countries[7]. The native English speakers taught English with Korean teachers of English as co-teachers or assistant teachers in the same classroom(i.e., Team Teaching)[8].

In 1996, the first year of EPIK, the program employed 660 native English speakers[5]. With the introduction of this program, the private sectors such as private educational institutes started hiring native English speakers as teachers. The number of these native teachers of English came up to almost 7,000 in 1997[5]. In 1997, Korea encountered an economic crisis called the IMF crisis, which caused the
devaluation of the Korean won and the cancellation of native English speaking teachers in EPIK. As a result of this economic crisis, the number of native English speaking teachers dropped drastically to only 262 in 1999[5]. As a result of this situation, the main role of native English speakers in EPIK changed from Team Teaching in the classroom to assisting or training Korean teachers of English. Since then, the number of English speaking teachers had been gradually increased to 8,520 as of 2012. This number, however, dropped drastically to 4,962 as of 2016[9].

Concerning the reasons for the sudden drop of the number of native English teachers, Lee points out the following reasons: their lack of qualification as teachers, Korean parents’ preferences of Korean teachers of English, and policy changes of the government[9].

Now EPIK does not draw qualified native English speaking teachers’ attention because of lots of problems, such as the lack of understanding of native speakers of English, and the cultural conflicts with English teachers and students in Korea. However, the main reason of the ineffectiveness of this program should be attributed to the mismanagement of native teachers of English and Korean teachers of English as fundamental educational resources in this program. In this respect, desirable solutions and recommendations should be provided and made in order to empower both Korean English teachers and native English-speaking teachers. The detailed problems of EPIK are examined more in detail in the following section.

2. Problems of EPIK

2.1 The lack of understanding of native English speakers

The EPIK official website still uses the term, native English speakers instead of native English speaking teachers[8]. If there is no clear understanding of native English speakers in EPIK, they cannot be efficiently served as teachers for the effective development of Korean students’ communicative competency in English. In this respect, the definition of native English speakers should be clearly examined.

2.2 Quality of native English speakers as professional teachers in EPIK

The biggest cause of EPIK’s failure is the lack of qualification of English speakers as teachers (see Table 1 for Eligibility for application in EPIK).

<table>
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<th>Eligibility</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Citizens of one of the 7 countries where the major language is English</td>
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<td>(i.e., United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Australia, Ireland,</td>
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<td>New Zealand, and South Africa)</td>
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<td>2. Minimum of a Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<td>A 100 hour or more TEF/L/ESOL/CELTA/etc. certificate for those who do not</td>
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<tr>
<td>have teaching license, B.Ed., Med., or who has a Teaching major, TESOL,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Language Acquisition studies, or any other of Education-focused</td>
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<td>major</td>
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<td>3. Being physically and mentally healthy</td>
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<td>4. Having a good command of English</td>
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<td>5. Having the capability and willingness to be accustomed to Korean life,</td>
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<td>language, and culture</td>
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In terms of academic qualifications, a bachelor’s degree is the only qualification to become English teachers in EPIK regardless of their majors[5]. In addition, qualified native English speaking instructors are heading to private sectors and leaving EPIK owing to the better financial rewards, and they also prefer the JET program in Japan because of the higher salary than that of EPIK[10].

With regard to the difference of eligibility
between EPIK and JET, the eligibility criteria to apply for the JET programme are very detailed and specified since the JET programme requires applicants to meet 18 criteria compared to EPIK which requires only 5 criteria as shown above[11].

In EPIK, there are three levels in native English speakers' qualifications and different wages per level. However, these levels and wage differences per level may not make any differences in their teaching in EPIK, since all native English speakers do the exactly same job in EPIK without any consideration of their levels. In fact, all native English speakers are called EPIK teachers compared to the JET program which has three types of positions: Assistant Language Teachers, Coordinators for International Relations, and Sports Exchange Advisors[11]. In addition, the applicants for the JET program who have teaching experience or qualification in the field of language education or general education can have additional consideration. However, more than 75% of recruited native English speakers in EPIK are third level teachers who are in their twenties and do not have any experience in teaching English as a foreign and second language[8].

2.3 Lack of preparation for EPIK

It is argued that EPIK was adopted without a full investigation. According to Choi[8], first, the Ministry of Education in Korea did not consider financial problems in EPIK, and this caused the influx of unqualified native English speakers as teachers in EPIK. Second, they did not consider the specific roles of native English speakers in the English language classroom. Native English speakers are assigned to schools to teach English in the formation of Team Teaching together with Korean teachers of English, but both kinds of teachers have no idea about 'Team Teaching'. With the failure of Team Teaching, their roles are shifted from Team Teaching to teacher training or materials development. The Ministry of Education should have investigated Team Teaching very carefully and have trained Korean teachers of English to work well with native English-speaking teachers in advance[8].

2.4 The short-term training programs for native English speakers to deal with the cultural conflicts in their teaching

EPIK provides a 30 to 45 hour orientation program for recruited native English speakers when they arrive in Korea along with a 15 hour on-line pre-orientation before arriving[7]. Precisely speaking, this orientation program of 60 hours in total is provided for recruited native English speakers to be ready to serve as teachers in Korea[5,8]. However, the orientation program of 60 hours may not be sufficient to prepare for the native speakers to adapt themselves to the totally different classroom settings compared to the classroom of their own countries.

In the real classroom, native English speakers usually meet two main problems. The first problem is the cultural conflicts between native English speakers and Korean students. With regard to the cultural conflicts in the classroom, these conflicts are mostly caused by the native English speakers' short of understanding of culture in Korea. The influence of Confucian culture is strong in Korea, and thus no one can deny the fact that the Confucianism has considerably affected culture in Korea[12]. As the influence of Confucian culture, Korean students have been used to the traditional format and circumstance of the classroom style[13] which stresses a their passive style of learning.
Students are used to attending the class without active participation[3,12]. With regard to their inactive participation, it also could be explained that their silence is considered an proper response and this mentality is widely and preferably allowed in Korean culture[3,13]. For this reason, it might be very difficult for English native speakers to make their students active participants in the class, and thus they feel isolated in the classroom[13].

The second problem is the lack of proficiency in the Korean language. In the Korean situation, native English-speaking teachers are required to handle monolingual and mono-cultural classrooms. In this situation, the lack of the Korean language can make native English-speaking teachers be isolated from the classroom and cannot draw students’ attraction. When it comes to native English speaking teachers’ language competence of the host country, the JET programme requires a functional command of the Japanese language depending on the positions they apply to[11].

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EPIK

3.1 The change of roles of native English speaking teachers in EPIK

First, the main role of native English speaking teachers in EPIK should be shifted from Team Teaching in the classroom to training Korean teachers of English through in-service training. It would be hard to expect for English native speakers to become English native speaking teachers in a short period of time (i.e., total 60 hours maximum) and just a 15 hour on-line In-service training[8]. Instead of recruiting lots of native English speakers, EPIK should recruit only a small number of professionally qualified English native speaking teachers that have at least a master’s degree in English language or language education, so they can train for Korean teachers of English.

Second, EPIK should utilize the recruited qualified native teachers as English education material developers and English program and curriculum developers. Through this change of their roles in EPIK, native English speakers will be empowered as professionals in English education in Korea.

3.2 Reinforcement of Pre-service and In-service Education

It is argued that “current pre-service education curricula in Korea are not adequate for producing capable teachers of English” (p.68)[5] because of literature based curricula. In this respect, EPIK should consider the placement of qualified native teachers into pre-service education so that prospective teachers can enhance their communicative proficiency in English before they become teachers.

In accordance with the reinforcement of pre-service education, the in-service education also should be emphasized in order to empower Korean teachers of English in their English teaching. Thus, it would be useful for EPIK teachers can be assigned to continuous “in-service teacher education programs” (p.697)[2].

3.3 Use of Virtual Reality technology for EPIK

As mentioned above, a maximum of 60 hour online pre-orientation and main-orientation are not enough for native English speakers to become native English speaking teachers. Nowadays, smart devices and computer assisted tools are widely used in language learning. In particular, Virtual Reality (VR) technology is used in a variety of fields[14] as shown below
In particular, VR technology is most often used in a variety of fields of Education. With regard to the use of VR in the field of education, Land[15] points that the use of VR technology can provide limitless provision of learning opportunities regardless of time and space, provision of meaningful activities in 3D virtual environments, and enhancement of participants’ performances. In a similar vein, Swier and Peterson[16] claim the usefulness of 3D digital games and virtual space for learning. They maintain that the development of technology on the provision of virtual space for learning and mobile devices can provide learners with "mixed reality, where virtual reality is combined with the real world" (p. 235).

Thus, in the on-line orientation and training services for native English speakers, the virtual educational environments can provide them with diverse chances to experience the actual teaching of English in real-life contexts within the Korean context with stress-free and enjoyable learning contexts, which eventually leads to their understanding of Korean culture, teaching culture, Korean language, real-like interactions with Korean teachers and students. However, previous studies on the VR technology use are limited to preliminary levels only in the contexts of pedagogy. Thus, the suggestions of this study are aimed to propose the actual use of the VR technology in orientation programs for EPIK teachers[17]. Overall, this pre- and continuous orientation and training service programs can provide native English speakers to be prepared for their teaching and adaptation to the Korean culture and language even before they come to Korea for teaching.

4. Conclusions

With the introduction of English native speakers as teachers of English through EPIK, both Korean teachers of English and Korean students began to become aware of the significance of communicative proficiency in English[5]. However, EPIK has still some problems to be solved for the effective development of Korean students’ communicative competency in English. Along with the effective development of this program, Korean teachers of English should change their attitudes toward English education. They should be linguistically and pedagogically well prepared[5] for the communicative approach in their English teaching. If teachers keep trying to develop their communicative abilities in English,
Korean students will begin to see their teachers as positive role models who can speak both English and Korean. In line with the use of VR technology for native English speakers, the VR can also be used for Korean teachers of English by providing opportunities to use and teach English in a virtual real-life environment. It is claimed that it is time to re-organize EPIK. It is obvious that qualified English native teachers will improve Korean students’ communicative competency in English. But the placement of highly qualified native English-speaking teachers in every school will require a huge budget. Of course, it will be the best way to recruit as many qualified native English-speaking teachers as possible so that every school can have these teachers, but in reality it may not be an easy and simple task owing to diverse issues including the financial difficulty.

In conclusion, qualified English native teachers should teach English teachers in Korea and should participate in developing authentic materials and curriculum instead of teaching students directly in the classroom. This means that their roles in EPIK should be reconsidered in order to make this program more effective. In addition, the use of VR technology should be considered for native English speakers to be prepared in their teaching in Korea through the use of VR in their orientation and training program. Lastly, Korean teachers of English should also be encouraged to develop their educational attitudes and communicative proficiency in their English through continuing support by qualified English native teachers in EPIK and also by the use of VR technology. Through this re-organization of EPIK, it is expected that both English teachers in Korea and English native teachers will be empowered as both qualified and confident teachers in their English teaching profession in Korea.

REFERENCES


