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# The anti-apprenticeship of observation: How negative prior language learning experience influences English language teachers' beliefs and practices

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## ABSTRACT

This study problematizes an issue for language teacher development in foreign language contexts by investigating the prior language learning experiences of South Korean English teachers and the influence of that experience on their teaching beliefs and practices. Across a generation, teachers had to adapt from a structural to a communicative-oriented curriculum. Prior research has shown that trainees lacking experience with communicative language teaching as students are less likely to teach communicatively; however, little attention has been paid to this issue locally. In the inquiry, data were collected from reflective writing with 18 in-service English teachers and follow-up interviews with 4 participants (2 novice and 2 experienced teachers). Findings from a grounded theory analysis show that participants' public school English learning experience served as an *anti-apprenticeship of observation*; that is, their own public school teachers provided models of what not to do as language teachers. Therefore, an implication of this study is that teacher education must play an important role in transmitting the professional discourse and having trainees critically reflect on their prior learning experience. Reflective inquiry is rare in this context; however, this paucity of reflective practice creates an opportunity for researchers to provide an empirical contribution regarding its efficacy.

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## 1. Introduction

Lortie's (1975) sociological study of teaching introduced the term *the apprenticeship of observation* while discussing the influence of teachers' prior learning on pedagogy. Experience as students affects future teachers' conceptions of practice in that it is an induction to the methods, norms, and discourse of an education system. For second and foreign language (L2) teachers, Borg (2003) asserted that "there is ample evidence" (p. 81) that their prior L2 learning can influence their L2 teaching practices throughout their careers. An important aspect of this experience, as M. Borg (2004) discussed, is that the apprenticeship of observation may be a factor in explaining why L2 teacher education has been found to have only a "weak effect on student teachers" (p. 275). Thus, understanding prior L2 learning is important for understanding the beliefs, practices, and development of language teachers. Although this topic has received some attention in western and English as a second language (ESL) contexts (Borg, 2003), and more recently in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (Borg, 2012),

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there is a need for further research, particularly regarding the beliefs and practices of public school teachers in EFL contexts that have undergone curricular reform (Borg, 2006, 2009; Kubanyiova, 2014). The present study addresses this gap by investigating the prior L2 learning experiences of non-native English speaking teachers in South Korea (hereafter Korea). This study is situated in the growing area of language teacher cognition research, where recent conceptual articles emphasized the necessity for understanding language teacher development from a sociohistorical perspective (Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). Therefore, the study investigates the apprenticeship of observation with experienced and novice Korean English teachers whose English learning straddled a changing national curriculum.

In Korea, education is a national obsession with a long history (Seth, 2002) and recently the English language has become an increasing part of this obsession (Park, 2009). In the 1990s, policy makers elevated the status of English in the education system, where it became one of three dominant subjects (along with Korean and mathematics) on university entrance exams. This was the case despite Korea being one of the most monolingual countries in the world (Song, 2011).

Curricular reforms circa 2000 changed the objectives for English education as the national curriculum moved from a structural to a communicative syllabus. English teachers had to adapt. However, despite significant investments in public school teacher education, prior research has shown that pre- and in-service teacher training has been inadequate for instilling change in teachers (see Moodie & Nam, 2016). A recent study with 320 high school graduates found that 97% preferred learning materials from the private sector and 78.3% preferred private English teachers compared to public school English teachers (Kim & Lee, 2014). Moodie and Nam pointed out that this is evidence for the crisis of confidence in public sector English education. Three quarters of students receive private education (Kim & Lee, 2010) and private English education alone was estimated to account for about 2% of Korea's GDP (Jeon & Choi, 2006). As Song (2011) argued, private education became "a social malady" (p. 45). Therefore, it is necessary to continue to look for ways to improve public sector English education in Korea. The aim of the present study is to contribute to this matter by problematizing one issue for English language teacher development, that is, the prior language learning of Korean public school English teachers and the implications of that experience regarding their knowledge about L2 teaching and learning.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Research on the apprenticeship of observation

A number of studies from the 1980s and 1990s discussed the influence of prior learning on the beliefs and practices of L2 teachers (Borg, 2006). A particularly relevant one came from Johnson (1994), who found that four pre-service participants' experiences with teacher-centered, grammar-focused classes shaped their intention to ensure that learning would be fun for their students (see also Bailey et al., 1996; Golombek, 1998; Numrich, 1996; Vélez-Rendón, 2002).

As Johnson (1994) argued, this phase is important because, for a pre-service teacher, their prior language education will in "all likelihood represent their dominant model of action" (p. 450). Grossman (1991) described the apprenticeship as something that needed to be addressed, commenting that prior learning experience "makes it difficult for prospective teachers to consider alternative visions of teaching and learning" (p. 345). More recent literature has reiterated that L2 teachers need to become aware of how their experience as learners shapes their beliefs so that they may move beyond them (M. Borg, 2004; Vélez-Rendón, 2002; Wright, 2010).

The context of prior education is an important aspect for understanding the apprenticeship of observation. Most early studies investigating prior learning were in western or ESL contexts (Borg, 2006). While context is not a determiner of beliefs, studies often note how it matters. For example, in Warford and Reeve's (2003) study, six of nine participants were native English speaking teachers (NEST) and three were non-NESTs from English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Notably, for the non-NESTs, prior experiences seemed to be stronger influences than for the NESTs, and this was apparent in the "sensitivity to the norms of teaching in their country of origin" (p. 47).

### 2.2. Research on English education reforms in east Asia

Below the review takes a closer consideration of the local context by reviewing studies of curricular reforms in East Asia, focusing on two countries that underwent similar English education reforms to Korea: Hong Kong and Japan. These studies show that the educational context of prior learning plays an important role in language teachers' responses to curricular reforms.

Studies from Hong Kong have suggested that as the local context changed, so did the beliefs of pre-service teachers. In the 1980s and 1990s, English language teaching (ELT) was characterized by teacher-centered, exam-based education with large classes and heavy workloads. Several decades of education reforms have supported more constructivist approaches. However, Urmston's (2003) survey of 30 ELT trainees (collected in the late 1990s), found that participants favored teacher-centered approaches because of their experience as learners (see also Richards & Pennington, 1998). Cheng, Chan, Tang, and Cheng (2009), however, showed that as reforms were implemented, they became more evident in student-teachers' conceptions of teaching, with all of their 31 participants favoring student-centered approaches compared to traditional teacher-centered methods. Nevertheless, implementation of reforms in classrooms has been problematic. Even those wanting to teach communicatively are confronted with the reality of exam washback, large classes with unmotivated students, and socialization from more experienced co-workers (Richards & Pennington, 1998; Urmston & Pennington, 2008).

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