A participatory EFL curriculum for the marginalized: The case of North Korean refugee students in South Korea

Mun Woo Lee*

Department of English Education, Hanyang University, 12-406, Haengdang-dong, Seongdong-gu 17, Seoul 133-791, South Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 February 2014
Received in revised form 1 August 2014
Accepted 5 September 2014
Available online

Keywords:
Refugee students
North Koreans
English curriculum development
Participatory English curriculum

ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues regarding the mainstream English curriculum for North Korean refugee students in South Korea, and delineates a participatory English curriculum as an alternative to the problematized mainstream English curriculum. During the first phase of the study, the researcher observed ten English classes and interviewed the principal, five English teachers, and thirteen students. In the second phase, the researcher implemented the participatory English curriculum based upon three steps suggested by Auerbach (1992). The findings suggest that mainstream English classes fail to motivate students and stigmatize them as low-achievers. In contrast, the participatory classes developed in response to students' needs help them become active agents of their English learning as well as of their new lives in South Korea through enhanced participation in class. The results of this study have implications for the development and implementation of a customized curriculum for marginalized students like refugees especially in EFL contexts.

1. Introduction

The Korean peninsula has been divided into two parts—South and North—since the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, and all political, economical, and socio-cultural exchanges between those two countries have been officially banned since then. However, along with the extreme economic crisis in North Korea, there has been an increasing number of North Korean refugees in South Korea since the late 1990s, with the total number of North Korean refugees in South Korea is now estimated to be more than 20,000 (Ministry of Unification, 2013). Among these North Korean refugees, about 10% are adolescents under 20 who need further schooling. Most North Korean adolescent refugees are politically and economically marginalized even in North Korea mainly because of their underprivileged family background and they usually spend several years in China or other Southeast Asian countries before they come to South Korea. While staying in those countries as illegal aliens, they experience extreme physical hardship, such as confinement or sexual harassment, as well as psychological stress caused by being separated from their family (Cho, 2011).

Under these circumstances, education is not properly sought, and this in turn, results in their maladaptation to the mainstream South Korean education system. Notably, however, this is not only because of the high-level of South Korean curriculum itself but also because of the implicit discrimination against North Korean refugees in general. North Korean refugees are often viewed and treated as “second-class citizens” who are eligible to take only indecent and seriously underpaid jobs in South Korean society (Han, Yoon, Lee, & Kim, 2011; Park, 2008). This discriminatory atmosphere is also applied...
to school settings, so it is not very surprising to see the number of the North Korean drop-out students is 12 times as high as that of the South Korean drop-out students (Jeong, Jeong, & Yang, 2004). Thus, the school curriculum for this underrepresented population should be able to give them an opportunity to pursue their dreams and encourage them to develop confidence as potential full members of the South Korean society.

The present study starts from this need for a customized curriculum for these marginalized refugee students in the South Korean context. It particularly focuses on a participatory English curriculum, which is expected to help empower the North Korean refugee students by letting them share and utilize their own experiences in English (Auerbach, 1992). In order to maximize the distinctive characteristics of the participatory English curriculum, it will be compared with the mainstream English curriculum used in an alternative school only for North Korean refugee students. The two research questions are as follows: (1) What are the inadequacies of the mainstream English curriculum for North Korean refugee students? (2) How can a participatory curriculum address the inadequacies identified in the mainstream English curriculum for North Korean refugee students?

2. A participatory English curriculum

Developing an English curriculum is a multidimensional task which needs much time and effort (Carless, 1998; Orafi & Borg, 2009). However, it is very important for students to be educated with a well-designed curriculum because it determines the shape of students’ English language learning process and influences on their eventual English language proficiency (Nation & Macalister, 2010). As Nunan (2001) points out, the most crucial characteristic for the success of a certain curriculum is the “contextualization” of that curriculum. That is, the viable English curriculum should reflect the students’ needs and situation directly, make them actively be involved in classroom interactions, and positively contribute to their English usage and proficiency.

This concept of contextualization of the curriculum can be linked to the principles of a participatory language curriculum well (Auerbach, 1992). Unlike traditional ones that emphasize top-down implementation, the participatory curriculum encourages the organic emergence of the curriculum itself grounded in the particularized educational setting. Thus, in this participatory model, the teacher and students should collaborate in order to produce and operate the curriculum. In addition, the teacher needs to take new roles such as helping students identify their own needs, utilizing appropriate activities and materials according to their interests, deepening their knowledge of English, and possibly providing them with opportunities to make productive changes in their lives (Balakrishana & Cornforth, 2013; Benesch, 1996; Frye, 1999; Kiara, 2011; Schwab, 2013). Auerbach (1992) summarizes the features of the participatory curriculum as “students” as crucial resources for language learning and “action” as the practical outcome of language learning.

She further elaborates three steps for implementing the participatory curriculum grounded in the Family Literacy Project that she has worked for. The first step called “ways-in” is to find out some themes related to students’ lives by listening to their stories empathetically and making them participate in the classroom activities which can help them express their genuine feelings and thoughts. The next step is the implementation stage by using various “tools” such as fables, proverbs, and children’s books. Particularly, the use of children’s books is emphasized by Benesch (1996), too, as one of the powerful “tools” to make students practice the language, pay attention to the issues around them, and take positions on those issues as independent beings. The final step is to take an “action” stage. By action, Auerbach (1992) means the gradual expansion of the realm from participating in the classroom activities well to changing the students’ lives. These three steps are sequential.

The studies regarding this participatory curriculum show its effectiveness especially in terms of helping the language learners become “authorities” of their lives as well as their own learning (Prokopy & Castellloe, 1999; Townsend, 2013). Ironically, however, despite the proven feasibility of this participatory curriculum in ESL contexts, its application to EFL contexts is still very rare because most curricula in EFL contexts are national-level-policy driven (Lee, 2011). South Korea, which faces an increasing number of North Korean refugee students every year, is not an exception. Since the Korean national English curriculum cannot embrace this newly appeared underrepresented population with multiple years of discontinuation of education and extreme physical and psychological experiences (Cho, 2011), an alternative English curriculum is strongly in need. Hence, the present study will focus on a participatory English curriculum for North Korean refugee students in a Korean EFL context.

3. English curricula in South and North Koreas

As mentioned above, the mainstream English curriculum in South Korea is national-level-policy driven. The current English curriculum in South Korea is the seventh version since 1964. The purpose of the English education in the seventh national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.27) is presented in Table 1.

Compared to the previous curricula, the seventh national curriculum has six conspicuous characteristics (Ministry of Education, 1997). First, it highlights the concept of “communicative competence” and the development of the language use ability. Second, it stresses oral language education. Third, the curriculum emphasizes activity-, process- and task-based learning. Fourth, the seventh national curriculum specifies the goal of English education by offering detailed functional examples and the increasing number of basic words to be taught. Fifth, it encourages the proficiency level-based curriculum with advanced and supplementary activities. Finally, the curriculum strongly emphasizes on learner-centered education. In short, the overarching theme of “communicative competence” and its relevant activities are the core themes in the current English curriculum in South Korea.
Interestingly enough, English has been officially taught in North Korea, too, since 1964 and has become a primary foreign language in 1991 owing to the collapse of the former Soviet Union (Lee, Yang, & Kwon, 2006). English in North Korea, however, is very restricted in terms of its usages. That is, the foremost and the only goal for English education in North Korea is for learning advanced science techniques from other countries, and this controls the contents of the textbooks used in elementary and secondary schools directly. For instance, Ko, Park, Park, and Jeong (2000) examine a set of North Korean middle school English textbooks and find out that five out of eleven chapters are directly related to scientific themes such as robots, computers, and the universe. Furthermore, the majority of supplementary reading materials also deal with science topics like volcanoes, the structure of atoms, or galaxies.

Along with the heavy focus on science-related contents, North Korean English education is characterized by old-fashioned teaching methodologies. According to Lee et al. (2006) who also analyze North Korean textbooks in secondary schools, the main teaching method used in North Korea emphasized memorization of sentence structures and vocabulary. Drills and activities introduced in the textbooks are not divided well based upon four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, the concept of “communicative competence” is not revealed at all in those drills and activities. This existing gap between North Korean English education and South Korean one can possibly cause frustration and even give-up when North Korean refugee students learn English in South Korea. Therefore, it is crucial to develop and implement a customized English curriculum in accordance with the needs and proficiency level of North Korean refugee students. The present study will delineate how a participatory English curriculum can be developed and implemented based upon three steps—ways-in, tools, and actions—suggested by Auerbach (1992). The first two developmental steps will be presented in the methodology section, and the last implementation step will be dealt with in the results section.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Context

The target school (Y school, hereafter) that I collected data was an alternative school only for North Korean refugee students in Seoul. Y school was founded in 2004 and was one of the few alternative schools that confer a legal diploma from the Ministry of Education in South Korea to graduates of the school. Since most students experienced discontinuation of education before they came to South Korea, their average age was slightly higher than that of the students in regular high schools. Y school provided a high school curriculum in line with the mainstream curriculum, and there were 87 students and 33 teachers in total. Thirteen of those 33 teachers were the regular teachers, while the rest of them were substitute teachers (or part-time lecturers in Korean). In terms of English teachers, there were three regular teachers and two substitute teachers excluding me.

4.2. Data collection procedures & participants

4.2.1. Phase 1: the mainstream English curriculum

In order to answer the first research question, “What are the inadequacies of the mainstream English curriculum for North Korean refugee students?”, data were collected from multiple sources. First, I observed the current English classrooms in Y school from March to April 2013. I audio-recorded the classes of all English teachers, six class hours from three English teachers and four class hours from two substitute English teachers, with the consent of teachers and students. The classes were varied in terms of the grade (5 for the third graders, 3 for the second graders, and 2 for the first graders), and there were 10 students per class on average. Second, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with the principal, all five English teachers, and 13 students1 from May to June, 2013. The interviews took about one hour and were all audio-recorded, too. The common leading questions for the interviews were “Why do you think you should teach/learn English?”, “What are the difficult parts when you teach/learn English?” and “How can these difficult parts be improved?” Finally, I attended a teachers’ conference twice in March 2013 to grasp the atmosphere of the school and the general information about the students. Each conference took about 90 min and I took field notes instead of recording the conferences. Subsequently, all the transcribed data were translated into English and double-checked by a Korean graduate student who majored in English education.

1 These students were the participants of my after-school English class. All of them took part in the class voluntarily.
4.2.2. Phase 2: the participatory English curriculum

The second phase of the study was related to the second research question, “How can a participatory curriculum address inadequacies identified in the mainstream English curriculum for North Korean refugee students?” To answer this question, three steps of the participatory curriculum suggested by Auerbach (1992) were implemented in order. I was able to develop and implement this participatory curriculum because I worked as a volunteer after-school English teacher at Y school. My class met every Friday from 5:30 to 7:30 pm during the spring and fall semesters in 2013. Also, there was an additional session on every Monday and Thursday during the summer vacation. There were 13 students in my class, and among them, seven were female and the rest of them were male. I took a role as a participant observer in every class and made a reflection note right after I taught them. All the classroom discourses were audio-recorded with their consent and later transcribed and translated into English by me. All students were seniors and their average age was 20.8 years old.

The class started in late March when I got acquainted with the participants quite well through the classroom observation. For the first class, I prepared a brief survey as “ways-in” which could help me listen to their real concerns. The survey asked their demographic information, English learning history, and what they want to learn in this class. The class was more like a casual conversation and they shared their thoughts openly. All of them said that they did not pay attention to English in North Korea because of survival issues. In addition, although three of them had learned English while they were staying in China, the rest of them had stopped learning English before they came to South Korea. They commonly pointed out learning English was one of the most important factors to determine the successful integration into the South Korean society and were afraid of being deprived of an opportunity for going to a college or a dream job with the help of their improved English skills; however, negative stereotypes children’s books often used for critical literacy lessons in the U.S. and referred to some possible provocative projects and activities that went beyond the text itself, thus in turn, were directly related to their own lives (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). The students were able to read nine books each of which contained the themes of identity, peace, friendship, honesty, courage, racism, etc. The final “action” stage is presented mainly related to the results and discussions section.

4.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was composed of two phases: phase one (data coding) and phase two (classroom discourse analysis). In the first phase, following grounded theory (Galser & Strauss, 1967), the interview data was coded in order to induce the themes related to the research questions. A systematic design in ground theory emphasizes the use of data analysis steps open, axial, and selective coding, and the development of a logic paradigm or a visual picture of the theory generated (Galser & Strauss, 1967). However, since the purpose of this study was not to generate a theory, the axial coding was modified and the selective coding was omitted.

For open coding, I tried to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories by reading and rereading the transcribed interview data with the research questions in my mind. The unit of analysis was a sentence because it enabled me to focus in detail on the information that the participants provided. For example, a paragraph could feature three different meaningful units such as “English is an important subject”, “English grammar is difficult to learn”, and “English classes in South Korea are very similar to the ones in North Korea”. Conversely, most sentences contained only one meaningful unit, such as “English classes are boring.” The first coding stage resulted in eight categories.

Next, I completed a modified axial coding. Galser and Strauss (1967) regard axial coding as making a relation among the open coding categories. When undertaking axial coding, a researcher selects one open coding category, puts it as a core category in the center, and positions the other categories in a way all of those can make a reasonable theory of the studied phenomenon. Instead of determining relationships among the categories, however, I came up with four major themes by synthesizing eight categories. The themes became the final categories: “unkind curriculum for the North Korean refugee students”, “stigmatization of the North Korean refugee students”, “enhanced participation of the North Korean refugee students”, and “self-driven activities and actions” (see Appendix 1).

---

2 The spring semester starts in March is the first semester in South Korea.
3 I also conducted a diagnostic assessment with the adapted version of the National Scholastic Achievement Test 2011 for second graders in middle school. They were all low level according to the test results.
4 The list of the children's books is as follows:

Table 2
An example of critical discourse analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Situated meanings</th>
<th>Social languages</th>
<th>Discourse models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1: Ah::: Is it like a gyom?</td>
<td>it: an orange (from the previous statement in Extract 1)</td>
<td>Asking for clarification</td>
<td>Using previous knowledge to understand a new thing is acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gyom: the name of fruit which looks similar to an orange</td>
<td>Ah::: (prolonged pronunciation) showing understanding</td>
<td>Asking a question about an unknown thing is acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4: Yeah! Sort of (.) But the taste is a little different→.</td>
<td>Answering to a question</td>
<td>Sort of: mitigating the previous statement “Yeah!”</td>
<td>If a question is asked, it should be answered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1: Teacher, we have a similar fruit in North Korea! It’s called gyom, and=</td>
<td>we: North Koreans</td>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>It is good to help a friend who does not know about South Korean-related things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It: a fruit similar to an orange</td>
<td></td>
<td>North Korean-related things can be discussed openly in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher: = OK. OK. Let’s move on to the next sentence .</td>
<td>the next sentence: the next sentence in the textbook</td>
<td>Changing the conversation topic</td>
<td>North Korean-related things should not be discussed openly in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(rejecting to share information) OK, OK: (repetition to stop student 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1: Oh, OK.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>It is good to obey the teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second phase, an analysis of classroom discourses was accomplished based upon critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2011). Since the purpose of analyzing the given data was to interpret what participants think based upon their statement, critical discourse analysis was an appropriate analysis tool for unpacking the underlying ideologies of the presented discourses. The data analysis procedure included three steps: transcribing the recorded data, selecting parts of data for critical discourse analysis, and analyzing the selected parts by using critical discourse analysis frame and method. In terms of the transcription, not only the verbal data from the audio recordings but also non-verbal data from field notes were included in order to catch the delicacy of their interactions. As for the data selection, there were two criteria: (1) the selected part should show the categories presented in the first phase clearly, and (2) a considerable number of participants should be involved in the discourse and some notable points (e.g. changes of the discourse flow or contrasting viewpoints) should be embedded in the selected part. The frame of critical discourse analysis by Gee (2011) was organized in a four-column grid as shown in Table 2.

5. Results and discussions

5.1. The inadequacies of the mainstream English curriculum

5.1.1. Unkind curriculum for the North Korean refugee students

Even though the principal, all the teachers, and the students themselves perceived English as the most crucial subject, the mainstream English curriculum for the North Korean refugee students was not customized enough to reflect their unique characteristics. They used commercialized English books as their textbooks, and the typical English class in Y school consisted of 15% of vocabulary memorization, 20% of grammar explanation, and 65% of reading the text. Among the observed classes, no class dealt with listening, speaking, or writing, let alone any kind of communicative task or activity. Thus, it was not unnatural that all the interviewees, including Student 4 and 9, complained about the boring contents and the old-fashioned way of teaching.

I really want to be good at English, but I always fall asleep in English classes. English is very difficult to learn, especially English grammar. Although I have learned English for two years here in South Korea, I think my English proficiency level did not improve that much. I meet some foreigners at church on Sundays and want to speak to them in English. However, all I can say to them is “hello” in reality. So, nowadays, I sometimes want to give up learning English seriously.

(Student Individual Interview, May 10, 2013, Student 4)

I just found that English was taught in a very similar way both in South and North Korea. And I’m afraid to say this, but both of them have really boring styles (laughing). We have to read and translate, read and translate, and memorize vocabulary. And the reading passages are so boring like the North Korean textbooks. I mean the contents are more diversified in terms of the theme, but they are still very boring.

(Student Individual Interview, May 31, 2013, Student 9)

5 Gee (2011) demonstrates several steps to dig into language and beyond, or Discourse. First, according to Gee (2011), meanings are not general when we analyze Discourse; rather, they are heavily dependent upon contexts. This is situated meanings. Second, Gee (2011) mentions that certain styles of language are used in certain contexts and directed for certain groups of people. It refers to social languages. Third, he explains Discourse models as simulations that triggered by Discourse, and they help us think about things and be ready for our actions in the world. In short, critical discourse analysis is useful for unpacking the underlying ideologies of the presented discourse and this study will use this critical discourse analysis as a main analysis tool for the collected data.
Student 4 criticized that the mainstream English curriculum failed to attract his interest and motivation to learn English by taking his own experience of not being able to communicate with foreigners in English as an example. He implicitly emphasized the role of English as a communication tool (Lee, 2010; Park, 2009; Song, 2010), but unfortunately, the mainstream English curriculum did not satisfy his criterion. Student 9 compared the mainstream English curriculum with the one in North Korea, and quite surprisingly, concluded that they were similar to each other with respect to their boringness. She further elaborated that the grammar-translation-based teaching method and the variety of the reading texts were not enough to motivate students. This went against the general assumption that English education would be different in South and North Korea. In other words, she presented the need for a customized curriculum for North Korean refugee students not because the two curricula in South and North Korea were different but because they shared commonalities (Ko, et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2006).

Ironically, the English teachers also were fully aware of the issues that the students pointed out. They all mentioned that the textbooks they were using were not appealing to their students because those were originally for South Korean students who studied English mainly for the national college entrance exam. They admitted the need of more particularized contents for their students who had intricate problems to adjust to the South Korean society as stereotyped North Korean refugees (Teachers’ Conference 2, March 29, 2013). Furthermore, they were concerned about their “boring” teaching style and wanted to find out a brand-new way of teaching English if it was possible. Teacher 1 shared her candid feelings about teaching these underrepresented population.

These kids are very pitiful, as everybody knows. They all have traumatic experiences and I wish I could heal them through teaching English. But the reality is just so different. Their English proficiency level is too low to implement various teaching methodologies, and some of them simply don’t know how to study at all because they haven’t studied in North Korea. I want to do many things in class like discussions and projects, but those are just like dreams.

(Teacher Individual Interview, June 7, 2013, Teacher 1)

She had the idealized representation of her English class with the North Korean refugee students, which was obviously different from her current English class. But then, she attributed the gap between the ideal and reality (Deuber, 2013) to the students like the other four teachers did. They justified their unilateral teaching style by highlighting their students’ low English proficiency and their not-ready-for studying attitude. So, instead of figuring out the possible solutions for the facing issues in the current English curriculum, they just kept following the “not good” curriculum and reproducing the biased representations of the North Korean refugees both implicitly and explicitly (Ferfoljam & Vickers, 2010; McBrien, 2005).

5.1.2. Stigmatization of the North Korean refugee students

These negative images of the North Korean refugee students recurred in the teacher individual interviews and teachers’ conferences were also observed in the classroom interactions especially between the teacher and the students. Since all English classes were heavily teacher-oriented, there were few verbal exchanges between the teacher and the students which could be called interaction. There were only 12 times of student-initiated interactions located during 10 class hours, and eight of them were just simple questions to ask the meaning of the word or check out the assignment. The rest of the student-initiated interactions were all good opportunities to show their previous knowledge especially related to North Korea, but their attempts were controlled by the teacher completely. The following excerpt was selected

[Excerpt 1: Classroom Observation 4, March 18, 2013]

1. Teacher: ((reading the text)) Fruits are good for your health, too.
2. Student 1: = ((raising his hand)) Teacher, what is this fruit in the picture?
3. Teacher: It’s an orange. Don’t you know orange?
4. Student 1: (1.5) Is it a tangerine?
5. Teacher: No, they are different.
6. Student 2: It’s much bigger than a tangerine.
7. Teacher: OK, OK, be quite, students! Be quite!
8. Student 1: Ah:: Is it like a gyom?
9. Student 4: Yeah! Sort of But the taste is a little different.
10. Student 1: Teacher, we have a similar fruit in North Korea! It’s called gyom, and=
11. Teacher: = OK. OK. Let’s move on to the next sentence.
12. Student 1: Oh, OK.

6. The transcription conventions are presented in Appendix 2.
among many other similar pieces which demonstrated how the student’s North Korea-related knowledge was neglected and how (s)he was positioned as “the powerless” or “the marginalized” in the discourse (McKay & Wong, 1996; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Norton, 2000).

Student 1 was the newcomer who has studied in Y school for only several weeks, and he participated in the class very actively asking questions to the teacher (Line 2). The questions that Student 1 asked, “Teacher, what is this fruit in the picture?”, could demonstrate his identity (McKay & Wong, 1996; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Norton, 2000) as a North Korean who has never seen an orange before and was in fact a good stepping stone that could involve the other students into the classroom discussion. However, his active participation was not very welcomed by the teacher. Although the teacher had been working at Y school for about 8 years, he treated the student like ordinary South Korean students and added an unnecessary comment, “Don’t you know orange?”, which could possibly intimidate Student 1 (longer pause before he answered the question). Even though Student 1 tried to guess the object, orange, grounded in his previous knowledge (Line 4), the teacher did not willing to help him by giving him a simplified answer (Line 5).

Moreover, the other students’ participation in the conversation was also restricted by the teacher. Student 2 and 3 elaborated the teacher’s answer voluntarily (Line 6 & 7) and their participation was not just a usual turn-taking in the classroom but an attempt to embrace the new comer who shared the same experience with them (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Thus, the teacher’s abrupt intervention, “OK, OK, be quite, students! Be quite!”, again showed his insufficient understanding of his students. He treated students’ conversation as mere chatting that he should control with his power. His rigid attitude was maximized when the students continued to form the voluntary learning community (Barab & Duffy, 2000) and tried to share “their” knowledge with him (Line 9, 10, and 11). Here, the fruit, gyom, worked as a symbol of unity among the North Korean refugee students, and at the same time, it could be new knowledge to the teacher who was not the member of the group.

Unfortunately, however, the teacher refused to learn new knowledge imposing the unseen hierarchy between “their” knowledge and “his” knowledge (Line 12) (Freire, 1970). His authoritative attitude was also revealed in the teacher individual interview. He said that his students were like “low-achievers” in South Korea so that he should “help” them from A to Z. In other words, he created this shadow curriculum (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Campno, 2007) that the North Korean refugee students’ lack of the ability was something inferior and anything he did in the classroom could be justified because he was basically helping them. The serious problem of this shadow curriculum was that it forced the student to take the image imposed by the teacher passively (Line 13). Repeatedly controlled like this, Student 1 would become one of the powerless students who just followed the given curriculum, and further, the given social rules that marginalized them. Hence, in order to make the North Korean refugee students as active agents of learning (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999; Townsend, 2013), the paradigm shift through a new curriculum was indeed needed.

5.2. The contextualization of the participatory English curriculum

5.2.1. Enhanced participation of the North Korean refugee students

In order to address the problems identified in the mainstream English classes above, the participatory English curriculum was developed and implemented. In contrast to mainstream English classes, which imposed learned passivity to the North Korean refugee students, the most distinctive change that the students showed in the participatory English classrooms was their active participation. This was mainly because of the organization of the class itself. Instead of focusing on vocabulary and grammar explanation, the class directly began with reading the text together and the teaching of vocabulary and grammar was integrated into reading naturally. After reading the text, the students were involved in various activities including writing their opinions and thoughts in English, presenting their writing in front of other students, and giving feedback to one another. The writing activities were done in English and often integrated with drawing (Mand, 2012) in consideration of “fun factors.” The presentation and discussion sessions were done in Korean due to their limited English proficiency.

The advantages of these activities were that they valued the North Korean refugee students’ previous knowledge and personal experiences and helped them apply those to their current lives. For example, the writing–drawing activity after reading the book, The Name Jar, demonstrated these advantages well. The book was about a Korean girl who immigrated to the U.S. and thought about changing her Korean name to an English name. Her classmates collected possible English names for her in a jar, but she chose to keep her Korean name at the end. Throughout the class discussions, the students felt empathetic toward Unhei who had to adjust herself to a totally new environment. Notably, ten out of 13 participants actually thought about changing their obvious North Korean names into South Korean-like ones or even English ones (Class Discussion 17, July 5, 2013). But after reading the book, they all agreed with Unhei’s decision to embrace their identity as North Korean refugees. The following excerpt displayed the conversation among the students when Student 7 presented the story about her name in the four-cut cartoon writing–drawing activity (see Appendix 3).
In this given excerpt, the students interacted with one another in the discussion session in a way that everyone could jump in and build up their knowledge together within a collaborative community (Barab & Duffy, 2000). It was possible because they shared the traumatic experiences of “crossing Dooman River” (Line 15) and “changing their names into Wei and Hana” (Line 17 & 21). Notably, they were not ashamed of talking about these experiences and opened up their stories, too (Line 19). When Student 12 said “Hey, my name is the worst,” everyone laughed, but it was not for laughing at his obvious North Korean-style name but for supporting Student 7’s confession-like presentation. Their support toward Student 7 continued until she finally reconciled with her original name (Line 25–27). Their response “Right” and “You’re right” acted as encouraging words to Student 7 so that she was able to show her deepest thought saying “I think, like Unhei, it’s important to be myself instead of trying to hide behind a new name.”

Unlike the teachers’ stereotypical perceptions, the North Korean refugee students were “ready to” take part in the class actively if the curriculum itself was a little more favorable to them like this participatory curriculum. Although their English proficiency level was too low to produce perfect sentences, they enjoyed the activities and showed marked improvement in English proficiency by the end of the semester. For instance, Student 5 who could barely read English vocabulary at the beginning of the semester was able to read short English sentences and understand the meaning of them correctly by the end of the semester (The Researcher’s Reflection Note 39, December 13, 2013). Most of all, the participatory curriculum provided the students with an opportunity to embrace their past which they have wanted to hide (Line 21, “I used a pseudonym Hana in Facebook and Kakao Talk.”) and change their perspectives onto their lives as North Korean refugees in South Korea (Line 31–32, “So the last picture is me, Cheol-soon, again, but happier than before. Look at this big smile and I also wrote “I’m happy.”). And that was why their enhanced participation in class was not only an effective way of learning English with various activities focusing on their particularized situations but also a voluntary “action” (Auerbach, 1992) which helped the marginalized be agents of learning and lives grounded in collaboration (Balakrishana & Cornforth, 2013; Kiara, 2011; Schwab, 2013).

5.2.2. Self-driven activities and actions

Along with the students’ enhanced participation in class, there were also more authentic actions that showed their agency (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999; Townsend, 2013). When the students read the book titled Back of the Bus, they demonstrated their raised awareness very actively. The book was about the story of Rosa Parks which ignited further equality movements of African-Americans in the U.S. Since the narrator was a little African-American boy, Rosa Park’s refusal to move her seat to the back of the bus and her subsequent arrest were depicted in a mild way. The students were very surprised at the fact that African-Americans were discriminated in the U.S. society for a long time and criticized the unfair social structure in North Korea which also discriminated people by the pre-determined social status (Class Discussion 35, October 11, 2013). Writing an English letter to Rosa Parks, they praised her courage and talked about what they could do in their current situation. Then they voluntarily created a new activity, writing to one of the leading English newspapers regarding the discrimination of North Korean refugees in South Korea. The following excerpt showed the interactions among the students regarding this new activity.

---

7 Kakao Talk is a famous Korean chatting application used in Smartphones.
8 The name is pseudonym.
9 Dooman River is in the borderline between North Korea and China. Most North Korean refugees escape North Korea by crossing Dooman River.
The students’ discussion began by sharing their thoughts (Line 35–45), and then naturally moved onto the discussion about the new activity (Line 46–59). Notably, the whole discourse evolved organically without any coerciveness from the teacher. As seen in line 47 and 54, the teacher’s role was not to force them to study but to facilitate their interactions accommodating the favorable atmosphere for the open discussion. In the first phase, Student 11’s question, “Can I do the same thing in the bus?”, expanded the realm of the discussion from the book itself to their own lives (Benesch, 1996; Frye, 1999). When Student 11 said she would do the same as Rosa Parks, everyone showed their favor by giving hearty cheers (Line 41). With this support, Student 11 was able to articulate her thoughts which entailed her will to be an autonomous action taker (Freire, 1970) in the South Korean society (Line 42–44). Her courageous statement opened up a new phase of the discourse. Student 13 brought up a sensitive issue about the status of the North Korean refugees from a newspaper article (Freire, 1970) in the South Korean society (Line 42). Many of them came here seeking a new life, but the reality was so harsh. They were swindled out of their money.

Furthermore, with a little help from the teacher, the voluntary writing activity turned into a meaningful project that involved the North Korean refugee students as active agents (Balakrishana & Cornforth, 2013; Kiara, 2011; Schwab, 2013). They did the activity as homework and shared their writings in class. Five of them, including Student 11 and 13, asked me to edit their writings with more sophistication than the usual feedback so that they could actually send them to the target English newspaper. Subsequently, three interactive feedback sessions were offered individually and they all sent their writings using school computers. Unfortunately, none of their writings was published. However, the whole process of this self-created activity gave them an opportunity to challenge the externally imposed representations (McKay & Wong, 1996; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Norton, 2000) and make their own voices through English. In this respect, the participatory English curriculum provided the North Korean refugee students with an opportunity for real learning and helped them show initiative in their new life in South Korea (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999; Townsend, 2013).

6. Conclusion

The present study attempted to delineate how a participatory English curriculum could empower the North Korean refugee students in South Korea in comparison with the mainstream English curriculum. Although the target school of this study strongly needed a customized English curriculum for the underrepresented population, the mainstream curriculum was not that different from the one for the South Korean students in regular schools. The participatory curriculum used in the present study, however, showed some possibilities for developing and implementing a contextualized English curriculum based upon the authentic needs of low-level English proficiency North Korean refugee students in South Korea. The curriculum was not only proficiency level-appropriate but also thought-provoking with critical questions that urged them to think about their life-relevant themes. The fact that they were able to take a small but important step to have agency in their learning (Lewison et al., 2008) demonstrated that the participatory curriculum could help the North Korean refugee students challenge the externally assigned representation as passive “second-class citizens” (Han et al., 2011; Park, 2008) and become autonomous beings in the South Korean society.

The contextualization of a curriculum is often described as an unachievable ideal in many EFL contexts where the pre-determined governmental-level curriculum controls and shapes all ELT curricula (Lee, 2011). However, this stereotypical
ideology is very dangerous since it could potentially perpetuate the mainstream English curriculum which marginalizes the underrepresented population both intentionally and unintentionally. In this sense, even though the present study was done on a small scale with a limited number of North Korean refugee students in South Korea, the suggested curriculum can be a good model for larger-scale curriculum development and implementation in many other EFL contexts where English is considered as important as their native language. Accessibility to these curricula, however, is not guaranteed equally to the marginalized, including refugee students. Thus, more research should be conducted focusing on developing and implementing participatory English curricula as a way of enabling greater learning possibilities and promoting agency for marginalized students.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2013S1A5A8025799).

Appendix 1

An example of open coding and modified axial coding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcripts (Examples)</th>
<th>Open Coding (Categories)</th>
<th>Modified Axial Coding (Final Categories)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always fall asleep in English classes.</td>
<td>English classes are boring.</td>
<td>Theme 1: Unkind curriculum for North Korean refugee students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is very difficult to learn, especially English grammar.</td>
<td>English grammar is difficult to learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just found that English was taught in a very similar way both in South and North Korea.</td>
<td>English classes here are very similar to the ones in North Korea.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their English proficiency level is too low to implement various teaching methodologies.</td>
<td>The students' English proficiency level is very low.</td>
<td>Theme 2: Stigmatization of the North Korean refugee students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of them simple don’t know how to study at all because they haven’t studied in North Korea.</td>
<td>The students do not know how to study or behave appropriately in the South Korean context.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The more I take this class, the more I think English is important.</td>
<td>English is an important subject.</td>
<td>Theme 3: Enhance participation of the North Korean refugee students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of all, it’s interesting. I never skip this class.</td>
<td>The after-school English class is very interesting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like this after-school class because I can do many activities using English.</td>
<td>I want to do many activities using English.</td>
<td>Theme 4: Self-driven activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2

Transcription conventions.

(.) Short pause
(1.0) Longer pause (in tenths of a second)
Italics
Underlining
↑ Markedly rising pitch
↓ Markedly falling pitch
Markedly level, “continuing” pitch
: Syllable elongation
= Latching speech
() Unclear or incomprehensible speech
(||) Gestures, laughter, etc.
Appendix 3

The four-cut cartoon writing—drawing activity.
The identifying information is deleted for the privacy of the student.

References


M.W. Lee / System 47 (2014) 1–11


