An Inquiry into Korean Students’ Learning Experiences Related to the ESL Curriculum in the United States

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I. Introduction

During the last several decades, the number of students who learn English as a Second Language (ESL) in American classrooms has been expanding. The annual survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition reported that nearly 10 percent of the total public school enrollments of K through 12th grade students have limited proficiency in English (NCSS Bulletin 101, 2003). These ESL learners come from diverse cultural, linguistic, educational, socioeconomic, and historical backgrounds, and they are also at different level on the English language-learning continuum. Students’ different learning abilities, attitude, styles, and their age of arrival in America also influence their educational progress. Students’ previous educational experience and their native culture’s perspectives on education and schooling also affect their education and performance at school. Depending on these various factors, ESL students will vary in their adjustment to new educational system in the U.S.A. Therefore, the ESL educational application should be considered differently according to literacy experience they have brought from their home. However, students experience in ESL classrooms that they are judged under the same assumption applied to
everybody, that their literacy practice from their home country is not counted, and that their learning ability is degraded; therefore they are losing their autonomy as active learners.

The number of Korean students who are studying in English speaking countries is rising every year and money invested for studying English abroad is enormous. However, the quality of English education offered by some ESL programs cannot reach their expectation. In addition, even though the number of ESL students in the American classrooms is increasing, the population of Korean students as ESL learners is insignificant (The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2001). Some ESL teachers have little understanding about Korean students’ educational and cultural backgrounds. Without consideration about cultural differences in the classroom interaction between teachers and students, Korean student’s reluctance to speak up during the class can be sometimes misunderstood as the lack of intelligence or confidence. As a result, they cannot receive appropriate academic and affective support needed for successful transition to mainstream American classrooms, even though their age is physically, academically and emotionally critical time for their growing up as successful and independent learners.

This paper will scrutinize some issues associated with ESL programs in America and Korean students’ ESL experience in the American schools. Through interviews with Korean ESL students, it is examined how the students had trouble with identity problems and disadvantaged curricular materials irrelevant to their academic needs and interests. Then, this paper will propose some suggestions that can benefit ESL students in their struggles to learn English and explore better ways to understand, help and benefit them in the American schools.

II. Some Criticisms Related to ESL Programs

ESL education in the United States has been practiced in a variety of forms reflecting the country’s social phenomenon and historical situation. In general, ESL programs have mirrored many political and social aspects