
As communicative ability has become important in school as well as in society, access to English education and real communication opportunities in English can have an immense influence on students’ higher education paths and career opportunities. This may further aggravate the inequality between the haves and have-nots that exists in our society and endanger the future for students. This study investigated a videoconferencing English program as an alternative English program to foster student English abilities in community study centers. In the four community study centers, 41 students and 11 teachers participated in the present study. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study explored the current situations of the students in the centers in regards to English education, the degree of the students’ satisfaction in the videoconferencing English class, and the ways in which the videoconferencing English programs promoted the students’ English proficiencies. The results of the study indicated that the students in the centers needed further support in English education, particularly authentic communication opportunities. The study also showed that the program enhanced student motivation and satisfaction, lowered their anxieties, and increased the amount of communication opportunities. As a result, the post-test and post-survey confirmed that the students’ overall English proficiencies were promoted.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of communicative language learning, student communicative ability has become a great interest in English education. In addition, increasing demand for
communication skills in real life has accelerated this trend in Korea. Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) recently announced the creation of the National English Ability Test which further emphasizes practical English and student communicative language abilities. In the test, student speaking ability will be assessed, which has only been indirectly tested in the traditional print-based test until now, and this will redirect English education in Korea.

While the current trends are considered to be headed in the right direction, there is also a great concern in English education in this country: if public education cannot prepare every student appropriately, there is a potential danger to exacerbate the gap between the haves and have-nots. It is very likely that students with more opportunities to communicate with native English speaking teachers may outperform those without such opportunities. Under the circumstances wherein student communicative ability, particularly speaking ability, becomes important in society and for high-stake tests, those who do not have access will be comparatively disadvantaged, if supporting systems and programs are not adequately provided for them.

As one of the supporting programs, community study centers are run by government and regional institutes. Students from elementary to middle school enroll in the community study centers wherein they study school subjects as well as other extracurricular activities. In terms of English education, volunteer teachers help students with basic phonics and reading skills, but the students are rarely engaged with the opportunity to study English beyond that, and they do not have real communicative opportunities in English. As a myriad of prior studies argued, the most effective way to promote student communicative ability is to use the language in real communicative events or activities, and furthermore, speaking can be best fostered by speaking (Rosell-Argilar, 2005), hence, it is crucial that students should have equal access to communicative opportunities in English.

The present study investigated the effectiveness of a videoconferencing program as an alternative approach to increasing communication opportunities with native teachers in the study centers and foster the students’ communicative abilities. The study explored the following questions:

a. What were the students’ situations in the study centers with regards to learning English? What were their needs in terms of English education?

b. To what extent were the students satisfied with the videoconferencing program?

c. In which ways was the videoconferencing program effective in promoting the students’ English proficiencies?