

## ***Native English-Speaking Teachers' Quandary: What to Do with So Many Students?***

**Christian Youngwan Shin**

*South Korea*

The perspectives of native English-speaking teachers are considered with respect to teaching relatively large groups of engineering and computer science students in General English courses at a Korean university. As problems related to class size are examined from the teachers' point of view through semi-structured interviews, it affords a rare occasion to hear what they really have to say about one issue which is continually identified as a major obstacle to teaching English as a foreign language. Considering that it may not be feasible to substantially reduce class size at most two-year colleges and four-year universities in Korea owing to financial constraints, remedies for minimizing the effect of large class size on English education are probed through the lens of the teachers. These remedies can certainly help address the problems encountered in big classes at the university in question and could possibly alleviate problems associated with large class size at other institutions in Korea and elsewhere with similar educational contexts.

**Key words:** class size, native English teachers, teacher perceptions, classroom management, EFL teaching

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is widely accepted by Korean scholars, educators and students that large class size can hamper language education. Especially when it comes to

language teaching involving native English-speaking teachers (called NESTs hereafter), large class size is known to greatly interfere with the effectiveness of their teaching (Hong & Jung, 2006). It hinders students from fully participating in class activities (J.-E. Park, 1997) and impedes adequate teacher-student and student-student interaction (Chin, 2002; Hong & Jung, 2006; Ju, 2002; Kim, Shin, Yang, & Kim, 1999; Koh, 2000; Lee & Im, 2005; G.-P. Park, 1999; S.-O. Park, 1988; Yom, 1999).

However, beyond want of interaction in the classroom, the literature on English education in Korea evidently falls short of clearly elucidating the nature of difficulties experienced by NESTs in relatively large classes. Consequently, apart from the suggestion of reducing class size “with a view to promoting more interaction” between the NEST and his/her students in the classroom (Lee & Im, 2005, p. 275), other practical intervention measures to help NESTs in a quandary over what to do with a large number of students have not been addressed in the literature. Simply put, very little is known about difficulties linked to teaching large classes.

There is little doubt that scaling class size to a manageable level would solve most of difficulties stemming from large class size. When the goal is to develop communicative skills, 20 students or less are ideal for English as a foreign language (EFL) classes at colleges and universities (Bang, 2004; Chong & Kim, 2001; Kim, et al., 1999; Lim, 2006). The smaller the class is, the greater the opportunities for meaningful exposure to the target language and teacher-student and student-student interaction there are (J.-E. Park, 1997).

While the old practice of keeping 80 to 90 students in a classroom may have lingered in some extreme cases (Ju, 2002; S.-W. Kim, 2000), it would be virtually impossible for students to have any personal and dynamic interaction with the NEST in a class that large. Admittedly, English courses with emphasis on the enhancement of communicative competence differ from those for specific or academic purposes as the latter could ordinarily accommodate a large number of students with lecture being the main mode of instruction, a point to be kept in mind.

Nevertheless, due to financial constraints, it may be unattainable to cut down the enrollment of students to 20 or less per class for many tertiary institutions (Chong & Kim, 2001). After all, class size reduction means “more classrooms and teachers” (Shin & Chung, 2009, p. 4). The reduction can escalate operating costs especially if the employment of additional NESTs is inevitable, a situation which could in turn be frowned upon by school administrators and board members. So, it is probably safe to assume that it is unlikely that drastic reductions in class size would take place across colleges and universities in the near future.

This prospect necessitates examining what aspects of large class interfere with teaching from the teachers’ standpoint, and devising practical means to deal with these obstacles to language teaching. The fact that colleges and universities in Korea have increasingly depended on NESTs to teach English for general purposes (Choi, 2008; Gang, 1999; K. J. Kim, 2006) makes it all the more opportune to explore the NESTs’ views on large class size. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered in teaching large groups of students?
2. What kind of change and support, if any, is deemed desirable?

The first question was intended to get a rather thorough account of the NESTs’ concerns over teaching relatively large groups of Korean students. The second question was posed to have the teachers ponder over possible remedies from their own perspectives, which could help alleviate problems associated with large classes.

Insights offered in this study can permit those involved in English education, in Korea and possibly other Asian countries with similar educational contexts, to be privy to the viewpoints of NESTs on large class size to a greater extent than before. Furthermore, the insights can help devise effective measures to improve the quality of education and increase potential benefits derived from having NESTs.

## METHOD

In the design phase of this study, purposeful or purposive sampling was chosen as a sampling method to select participants based on “their characteristics relative to the phenomenon under study” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 200), in anticipation of rich data that the participants may offer in relation to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As qualitative research generally does not seek the generalizability of results, random sampling which takes proportionality and sample size into consideration was not considered to be a primary concern for the study (Trochim, 2006).

### Participants

As naturalistic inquiry chiefly focuses its attention on enhanced understanding of specific and complex human issues (Marshall, 1998), purposive sampling is not uncommon in qualitative research. Six teachers (one female, five male) were invited for an interview. In the end, five teachers showed interest in participating in the study, and it was deemed sufficient given that a proper sample size is “one that adequately answers” research questions (Marshall, p. 522).

The participants were native speakers of English. They were Caucasian male in their forties or fifties. They had 90 years of teaching experience collectively and had substantial experience of teaching at the tertiary level of education. Pseudonyms were given to ensure confidentiality as follows: Bill, Harry, John, Sean and Tim (see Table 1 for their profiles).

**TABLE 1**  
**Participants' Profiles**

Name	Age	Nationality	Years of Teaching
Bill	Late 40's	The U.S.A.	27
Harry	Late 40's	Canada	13
John	Mid 50's	The U.S.A.	20
Sean	Early 50's	New Zealand	17
Tim	Late 40's	England	13

All participants taught at the university where this study was conducted for more than four academic terms. All of them taught one to three English classes of engineering and/or computer science students during the period of interest. While anywhere between 25 and 40 engineering or computer science students could be present in one of these classes, about 35 students were normally enrolled in most of these classes at the time of study. It should be noted that English classes for students in all other fields of study had the enrollment of 16 to 20 students on average at the university.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interview was chosen as the primary method of data collection because it was suitable for the framework in which the present study was conducted (Walker-Gibbs, 2004). By allowing the participants to reconstruct their experience through their own eyes, it was hoped that they might be able to paint reality the way they saw it (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). It was believed that each account of reconstructed experience could give a rich and truthful description of reality as the participants understood it or wanted “others to know of it” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8). After obtaining informed consent, conversations which ran for approximately one hour on average were recorded with the participants’ permission. During face-to-face interview sessions, the participants were encouraged to talk freely about issues which they considered to be of relevance and significance.

Since the participants were required to complete a course report for each class offered to engineering and computer science students at the end of each academic term (see Shin, 2010 for the discussion of the report), the reports—prepared by the participants and seven other NESTs working at the same university—were retrieved and reviewed with written permission. As an additional method of data collection can help better tackle the problem (Hramiak, 2005), and enhance the study’s creditability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and its trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003), the writing in these reports were used as supplementary data.

## **Data Analysis**

The recorded conversations were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were provided to the participants via e-mail for member checking. The marginal remark approach was employed to code and analyze interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Key topics were coded and categorized in order to identify emergent themes and patterns while taking "adequate account of contextual conditions" (Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 82). Emergent themes in the transcripts were compared to the participants' written responses in the reports where appropriate.

As this study was carried out from the insider's perspective, the subjectivity of the researcher which could have its impact on the data collection and their interpretations was taken into account. Reflexivity, understood as "reflection with self-critical analysis" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 348), was employed, in effort to carry out "careful, self-conscious analysis to uncover various 'truths'" (Walker-Gibbs, 2004, p. 177). In addition, whenever possible, the words of the participants are presented as they were articulated, in order to fully convey the range of emotions expressed. It is hoped that their own words will also help convince the reader of "the believability of that world" by "drawing her or him into the world of the participants" for improved credibility (Hustler, 2005, p. 17).

## **FINDINGS**

In the last sections of the course reports completed at the end of each semester, various suggestions were made by the NESTs regarding how to improve language education for engineering and computer science students (As the teachers apparently considered computer science students as engineering students and made no distinction between two student groups in the reports and during the interviews, the term engineering students is broadly used to include computer science students hereafter). Although

suggestions covered a wide range of issues possibly due to diverse teaching philosophies and practices embraced by the NESTs, class size stood out as a prevalent concern for them (6 out of 12 NESTs).

A large number of students in the classroom were perceived to be a formidable obstacle in the way of effective communicative language teaching. The following comment on a report indicated that a class of more than 20 students was basically too large for the teacher to interact adequately with individual students: “It was impossible for me to listen to every student and interact with them as much as I feel would have been ideal.” As for an upper limit on student numbers that could be managed successfully, the participants held different opinions but seemed to agree that no more than 20 students should be allowed per class. Otherwise, it can get “to be quite a disorganized class” as Harry confided who, incidentally, believed that his classes should have a ceiling of 25 students, provided that they are not exceptionally motivated.

### **Class Size as a Hindrance to Language Teaching**

With a large class, it took a relatively long time to take care of routine tasks such as taking attendance, checking homework and conducting comprehension checks. Such mundane, albeit necessary, chores took away from instruction time, leaving less time for lessons and activities, as Bill succinctly put it: Large “class size does constrict and restrict the actual learning process.” Also, it was perceived to be nearly impossible to manage the class as a whole, a commonly held viewpoint voiced by the participants. Harry shared below how he felt about working with large groups of students.

I think that [the class size] is probably the main problem with engineering classes. That they are little bit too big. Because the bigger the class is, the more difficult it is to get speaking time for all of the students . . . [or to do] exercises with the whole class. So, the more you need to depend on doing pair work and small-group work.

He went on as follows:

And if it's a less motivated group, then it's [even more] difficult. You can only be really with one group at a time. And so, I found with bigger classes that are not very motivated that, you know, they don't stay on task when they're doing pair work and group work. They'll do what you want them to do when you're paying attention to them but *not* when you are not paying attention to them. So, it's difficult to control the class.

Indeed, the view that smaller class was a necessity resonated among the participants because a large group of apparently disinterested students was a major impediment to communicative language teaching. Obviously, the low level of involvement of engineering students in learning tasks and activities was well recognized by the participants. With a notion that lack of motivation was detrimental to language teaching and learning, the participants regarded lukewarm responses as a serious problem. Bill described below what it was like to teach engineering students.

The bottom is electrical engineering. You could put a stick of dynamite into their nose and set it on fire, their face . . . [would] not change. You have a feeling, when you teach them, that you're working. You're the only one working in the classroom. Their facial expression never changes. There are always some individual exceptions, but it's a general rule. You feel like you're doing 99 percent of [the] work. Some of them are a bit shy by nature. There could be other reasons. Maybe . . . they are not interested in English. Maybe they are not interested in anything . . . [outside] electrical engineering. Whatever the reason [may be], it's harder to motivate them.

To be fair, it should be pointed out that the account given above was merely being related from one teacher's experience. Thus, the reference to the particular discipline should be considered only within this context. In other words, the viewpoint regarding electrical engineering students ought not to be generalized. Likewise, it would be dangerous to pigeonhole engineering students as being unmotivated and having a low level of English.

[E]ngineering classes tend to be a little bit less motivated than average. . . . But there are always some good students in the engineering classes at the same time, I have to say. I've never had an engineering class [in] which there were no good students. (Harry)

Also, it needs to be pointed out that the negative attitudes of engineering students could have been more acutely felt simply because of the class size. It is possible that class size can have influence over the dynamics of the class as implied by Harry, drawing on his personal experience: "As soon as I had [smaller] engineering classes . . . , I was able to get them to function better. . . . [I]t's much easier to control the class if it's smaller." To put it another way, if the classes were smaller than they had been, class management would have been easier and the teacher would not have been bothered by the students' attitudes to such an extent.

### **Other Factors Compounding the Difficulties Associated with Large Class Size**

The participants shared the view that a lack of enthusiasm also had a negative impact on their teaching mainly because it was difficult to get unmotivated students to engage in active learning. They, however, had fairly different ideas as to why engineering students in particular appeared to be indifferent and uninterested in the classroom. Although the explanations provided by the participants seem unrelated at first, they are closely intertwined and ought to be considered together to get the complete picture.

First, the participants perceived that engineering students were alike in many ways. The students had nearly identical educational experiences prior to entering the university because the primary and secondary education systems in Korea have been more or less standardized. Many of them also shared somewhat similar socio-cultural backgrounds as a leeway to pursue their interests had been largely regarded as a luxury by their parents and school teachers in the past. While individual students may be delightful and fascinating, the students as a whole appeared to be homogeneous with no

character, making conversation shared in the classroom sound trite.

As Bill described a typical interaction among engineering students, he recalled teaching some students at a women's university who were all too complacent for his taste.

[They were] all Korean rich girls. The conversation in groups of four [was like this]: "What do you think about marrying a man you love who is poor?" A girl number one gives her opinion. Next girl, "I agree." Next girl, "I agree." Next girl, "I agree." [It was] because they all came from [the] same socioeconomic background and had the same experience, the same interest, and the same major. Communication didn't really flourish. And we get that in the room full of the same kind of engineers, that same phenomenon.

In his opinion, there really was not much to share for the students from similar backgrounds, with similar interests, and of similar values. Hence, it seems that the tendency to blindly concur in language classes can be explained in part by close similarities among the students.

Moreover, engineering students also appeared to be well acquainted with one another. Not only had they taken a string of required courses together being in the same departments, but also spent a great deal of time together outside the class. So, there was no genuine interest in talking about everyday matters with one another in the language classes again, and a dearth of real desire made it difficult for these students to immerse themselves in conversation, provided that conversation topics covered daily life experiences.

Secondly, owing to a preponderance of male students in the engineering departments, students in English classes were predominantly of the same gender, a fact which was perceived to compound the difficulties arising from large class size. There was little interest among engineering students to communicate with one another to begin with, but the absence of female students apparently did not help the situation as reasoned below:

If you have a balance between men and women, they have different things to talk about. . . . Women tend to be a bit more talkative than men. They

can get men [to] talk more, whereas if you've just got men they have limited things they can talk about. (Tim)

It was believed that the presence of female students could brighten the classroom, increase the interest level in the classroom full of male students by bringing in fresh viewpoints, and help male students converse longer. It is possible that having members of the opposite sex take part in discourse can stimulate the curiosity of interlocutors.

Relatedly, because the engineering classes largely consisted of male students, the class dynamic was different from the one in mixed company. As the majority of engineering students usually remained taciturn when it came to communicative tasks and activities, they were repeatedly characterized by nearly all participants as being reserved or even withdrawn, a quality which partially gave the class its personality. Strangely though, John thought that engineering students were generally rowdy in the classroom.

Maybe, over on the other side of the classroom, they're laughing and kidding around and speaking in Korean. It's been in general that engineering classes' behavior is not as collegiate or . . . not as mature as you'd expect of 19-year-old or 20-year-old college students in general.

John jokingly blamed himself for "not being able to get around quickly enough and fast enough to keep them on the task." During a casual encounter, the female NEST who declined the invitation to interview made a similar offhand remark about engineering students being disorderly and expressed her dislike of handling these uncontrollable students.

Perhaps, an undercurrent of students' dissatisfaction could manifest in different ways, depending on the teacher's character and class management style. Apparently, these male students chose to show their discontent in different ways. Regardless of how engineering students vented their discomfort, their behavior was perceived to be undesirable for language learning.

Class personality seemed to have an effect on teaching as alluded to above.

It can affect the teacher's level of comfort in dealing with students and influence his/her disposition toward students. One of the participants described his tendency to have a sunny disposition in a class of relaxed students with an undertone that he probably conducted himself in a more businesslike manner in a class of seemingly disrespectful or uptight students. As knowledge dissemination was not usually a priority for NESTs, elements that affected class dynamics could have a significant impact on the teacher's ability to engage his/her students on assigned tasks.

Thirdly, the participants thought that peer pressure from classmates including upperclassmen hindered students from fully participating in class.

I think it [having quite a few seniors and juniors together in the class] affects the freshmen in the way they act. Also, juniors and seniors . . . try to control the class sometimes. You see, they also control freshmen to an extent. Maybe it's something I'm imagining, but . . . I . . . think they don't mix well with freshmen. It's sort of hierarchical. . . . It's a respect thing.  
(Tim)

With solidarity among male students, which was often evident early in classes consisting mainly of students from the same department or major, peer pressure could work unfavorably. To be more specific, there seemed to be a strong tendency among the students to regard the act of active engagement as a sign of boasting or seeking favoritism. Perhaps, this tendency was easily noticeable owing to the students' mixed feelings of solidarity and rivalry. With solidarity came rivalry as students had to compete with one another in most of the classes they took together (their performances were typically evaluated on a curve rather than a straight line).

It appeared that any praiseworthy deeds in the classroom were quickly discouraged and eschewed by the students. Although the reason which accounted for this tendency was not perfectly clear, it was apparent that this misconception could eventually induce most students to become passive, reticent and minimally responsive, forming an undesirable learning culture in which active involvement was shunned collectively. In the end, the whole

class appeared to be conspiring to keep the class dreary for both the teacher and students themselves, intensifying a lack of enthusiasm over time.

To recap, it was perceived that engineering students, who were mostly male, tended to have little to share with one another and wanted to be left alone to do whatever captured their interest at the moment. All things considered, when a large body of students appeared to be uninterested in taking an active role in class and unresponsive to the teacher's invitation to get involved, a valuable opportunity for learners to practice and develop English skills was lost, a conviction widely shared among the participants.

## **DISCUSSION**

One aspect of teaching English to relatively large groups of engineering students was explored from the perspectives of NESTs. It was found that the teachers preferred smaller classes for two reasons. First, a group of more than 20 not-so-highly-motivated students made it a daunting job for the teachers to keep the learners focused on tasks at hand. Considering that classes taught by NESTs are not generally based on lecture but rather tasks and activities, it is reasonably understandable why NESTs frequently fail to manage their classes in relatively large classes (see Lee & Dash, 2003).

As put forward in the literature, it was also perceived that meaningful teacher-student and student-student interaction was unattainable in large classes. In order to improve speaking skills, time to practice speaking with the teacher and their peers are considered invaluable, especially when it is scarce for students to engage in any meaningful discourse with English speakers outside the classroom (O'Donnell, 2006; Rha, 2009; Won, Lee, & Jeong, 2009). For this reason, an environment which fosters the active participation and engagement of students is imperative in a class led by the NEST (J.-E. Park, 1997).

### **Fostering Diversity and Fair Competition**

As an alternative to reducing the number of students, the possibility of bringing together students from diverse fields of study should be considered if the benefits of student-student interaction in pairs and small-groups are to be reaped. Although Korean students may be fond of taking classes together with their peers from the same department and major (J.-E. Park, 1997), such preference or administrative convenience goes contrary to the goal of maximizing the students' exposure to the target language. Bringing in students from various disciplines together can diversify the student demographic in the classroom.

Such a move can take advantage of genuine interests in students to make new friends and get to know them. This way, students at least have real interest to talk to one another in the classroom. Diversity can raise the students' interest level in the classroom, and working with students from various fields of study could improve their social life and help hone their social skills. Moreover, the presence of students with high motivation from different disciplines could enliven the learning atmosphere, creating an environment in which unmotivated students would be less prone to giving in to peer pressure (C. Park, 2000). Indeed, the active involvement of a few highly motivated students could set the tone for and gently sway the rest of students in a positive direction (The opposite may hold true as well).

You know [in] every class . . . there is a quantum number of students in a class that produce the basic mood of the class. So, if there aren't enough good students, they don't produce the basic mood of the class. (Harry)

When students are highly motivated, enthusiastic and receptive, class management often proves to be less demanding. Therefore, rather than arbitrarily assigning students to English classes according to their study focus, the choice of enrollment should be turned over to students. In other words, regardless of their major(s), students should be allowed to make decision to enroll in an English course of their choice, based on one's schedule and

preference for an instructor. When necessary, some restrictions may be imposed to ensure adequate crossover between various fields of study. This will help offer a broad knowledge base, widen the students' perspectives, and ultimately prepare them for collaborative endeavors with people from different walks of life.

To better cater to the students' specific needs (with a relatively large class in particular), efforts to help students take classes well suited to their needs ought to be made at the same time. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all course for all freshmen and leaving NESTs to make necessary adjustments as they see fit, General English classes should be restructured according to the students' levels of proficiency (Lee & Im, 2005). It is rather natural for learners to lose interest if the class is either too difficult or too easy (Y.-H. Lee, 2003).

Learners with exceptionally low proficiency should be encouraged to take a remedial course as suggested by Harry: "To me, it would be better if there were a two-tier system. If you can't do the regular conversation course, then there should be a more basic version of the course that you can . . . [take]." A preparatory course of one- to two-week duration should not be construed as a remedial course. A remedial course should be able to develop the learners' skills to a point that they can enjoy taking part in learning in regular classes without feeling terribly nervous or left out at all times, a feeling which can interfere with learning (H.-J. Lee, 2001). Such a remedial course can be taken either prior to taking a regular course or as a substitute for a regular one, depending on whether English proficiency is a graduation requirement or not.

Likewise, fluent students should be persuaded to take an advanced course for fair and healthy competition in lieu of a regular one. Although it is naïve to believe that all students can successfully become fluent and acquire intercultural competence upon graduation and that each and every one of them will regularly use English after graduation, their educational prerogatives should however be, at the tertiary level of education, to have an adequate opportunity to learn and improve their English skills to an extent which they can successfully communicate with people from around the world.

In the grand scheme of life, the discussion of whether a student fulfills a graduation requirement by taking this class or that is nearly irrelevant, and perhaps completely meaningless, if we should fail to prepare him/her for future challenges of interacting and working with our neighbors in the global village, a point which cannot be overemphasized in times of globalization and internalization.

Together with the score on the English section of the national university entrance exam called *College Scholastic Ability Test*, the outcome of on-site level-testing (Chong & Kim, 2001; Yom, 1999) or a commercially-available proficiency test, e.g., TEPS, TOEFL, and TOEIC, can be used for placement. In-house level-testing alone may not be sufficient as brought up by Bill who had to work with the placement of students at another university.

I've been in places with level testing, and students are not always honest with that. . . . [S]tudents often faked their level to get into the lower level class so that they'd shine with the better grade. Ah, so, the only reliable test, after one year in the job, was, I decided, to actually use their university entrance exam score. There, they were all trying their best.

As it turned out, the combination of level-testing and the entrance exam scores reportedly worked wonders.

Besides on-site level-testing, an additional means of assessing the students' English proficiency can be beneficial in case an unexpected circumstance prevents an institution from administering level-testing. Perhaps, when and if the university entrance exam includes evaluation of the test takers' productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing, then there would be little need to use either an in-house level-testing outcome or a commercially-available proficiency test score for the placement of first-year students.

However, despite a general consensus shared among English teachers about the necessity of sorting out students and placing them in classes according to their proficiency levels, class division by proficiency levels may not be agreeable to all students for the following reasons (Bang, 2004; Ju, 2002; J.-E. Park, 1997): (a) level-testing may not be able to accurately assess

the proficiency levels of students; (b) similarly, the criteria for such an evaluation are not transparent (nor made comprehensible to students); (c) fear of being categorized by peers and instructors as slow learners exists in case one is placed in a lower level class; and (d) the same or similar content would be used across different levels anyhow.

What these concerns indicate is that the placement should be carefully made in a way that is acceptable to students too. Naturally, this also entails designing separate syllabi tailored to suit the specific needs of students at different levels and guiding teachers to cover the standardized syllabus of each course as intended. In the long run, benefits derived from availing customized courses and placing students properly will outweigh an investment of time and resources. One benefit will undoubtedly be that students, even in a relatively large class, could have meaningful interaction with their peers as the class could be managed more efficiently. Therefore, if the size cannot be reduced, then students from diverse areas of study should be allowed to join together according to their proficiency and year of study.

### **Raising Awareness among NESTs**

Moving away from the discussion of bringing greater diversity into class, systematic measures should be available to help NESTs gain a better understanding of Korean college and university students. This is crucial because of a discrepancy between the Western teachers' beliefs of how language is best learned and the Korean students' expectations of how language should be taught in the classroom, a gap which could jeopardize the chance of obtaining desired teaching and learning outcomes according to Kumaravadivelu (1991). For instance, with a firm belief that dialogical learning is a pedagogical cornerstone (Ryu, Hwang, Nam, & Lee, 2006), NESTs might be inclined to rely heavily on group talk as exemplified by Lee and Dash (2003):

[There was] native English speaking teachers' obsession with the [*sic*] group-, debate- and discussion-type or interactive teaching styles that

Korean students did not find meaningful or relevant to their learning. These teaching techniques, if used sparingly and properly, could be very effective in developing students' language competence, but the Korean students could not accept them being used as major teaching methods. They believed that native English speaking teachers [*sic*] teaching was intolerable and that students had to obey the teachers [*sic*] commands instead of willingly participating in-group activities. (pp. 110-111)

For those who are accustomed to lecture-based teaching styles, the NESTs' unfamiliar way of conversing with students and engaging students in dialogues can be frustrating. A sense of dismay and hostility, as implied by Y. Kim (2004), may be begotten in learners when they feel pressured to perform seemingly meaningless, irrelevant and stressful activities on a regular basis. If pressure becomes intolerable, the levels of students' interest could eventually decline to the point they end up acting up, responding poorly to the teacher's instruction, or a *mélange* thereof.

This situation could easily be exacerbated when students are slow to respond from the outset. To put it another way, some Korean students, especially in math, science and engineering disciplines, are used to listening quietly to the teacher with deference, and it may take much more than a friendly invitation or a gentle nudge for them to start taking active roles. Efforts need to be made on the teacher's part to wean learners from all-too-familiar teacher-centered learning modes and ease them into collaborative and interactive language learning and teaching (Rao, 2001). For this, a diverse assortment of interactive patterns and teaching materials can be adopted to satisfy the learners' specific needs and pique their interests (Doughty & Pica, 1986).

Similarly, some students are not so forthcoming simply because they are not capable of carrying out required tasks and activities due to low proficiency. As explained by Sean, one possible reason for students to pause and "go back to speaking their first language" is plainly because they lack "the ability to maintain some momentum [in] whatever they are discussing" in English. The students' low ability—together with a belief that they would

lose face if their incompetence were exposed by making mistakes—could deter them from expressing themselves freely in the classroom. Hence, some students might be prone to choose a path of saying the least or steer clear of a chance to engage in meaningful discourse, and this may also account for the students' tendency to readily concur with others.

The awareness of NESTs should be raised so that these teachers may become cognizant of “a set of culturally embedded base expectations” and practices vis-à-vis teaching and learning styles prevalent in the Korea educational setting (Grass & Ilon, 2009, p. 190). The teachers' awareness is crucial as “[e]ffective matching between teaching style and learning style can only be achieved when teachers are, first of all, aware of their learners' needs, capacities, potentials and preferred learning style in meeting these needs” (Rao, 2001, p. 4) and when they are attuned to their students' expectations (Li, 2003). Without being aware of the needs, expectations and learning styles of their students, it can be quite easy for NESTs to misinterpret the students' reluctance as disinterest, indifference, and/or inadequate effort and respond accordingly in dealing with their students (Li, 2002), rather than striving to create an environment in which students could open up and take an active role.

Seminars can be held to raise the awareness of NESTs about the preferred learning styles and needs of their students while providing outlets for constructive discussion for experienced and less experienced teachers to talk about issues pertinent to teaching. Such opportunities could bring about positive change in the teachers' attitudes toward those who appear to lack enthusiasm, and positive attitudes can in turn contribute to fostering a friendly and productive atmosphere. Bill acknowledged the necessity of such an environment below:

[O]bviously at the end of the semester, we have some students who succeed and some who do not succeed as well. A part of that [their failure] might be [poor] study habits. A part of that might be [the lack of] practice. I think just as validly a part of it might be our failure to create the proper learning environment for . . . [those] students [who do not succeed]. That's something we could look into, once again depending on smaller classes.

In conjunction with the implementation of measures to raise awareness, opportunities to help NESTs develop skills for drawing out students and facilitating teacher-student and student-student interaction should be provided (I.-D. Kim, 2000). For this, opportunities for workshops, in-service training, peer observation, and other means of familiarizing the teachers with effective teaching methods and materials should be presented over time to enhance their pedagogical strategies and methods. Perhaps, better yet, professional learning communities should be promoted in which NESTs can learn from one another and grow together on their own (see Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

## **CONCLUSION**

The chief concern perceived by NESTs regarding teaching English to relatively large groups of engineering students is discussed in the current paper. A large group of students lacking enthusiasm can hamper meaningful teacher-student and student-student interaction and thus have a negative impact on communicative language teaching and learning. As a means of addressing this concern, two recommendations are made as follows: (a) class division should be sorted out according to proficiency levels, rather than fields of study; and (b) measures to raise the awareness of NESTs about their students should be implemented.

While these recommendations are good for promoting interaction in general, the first one is particularly useful for maximizing the degree of student-student interaction in language classes by taking advantage of genuine curiosity that can arise from the encounters of students from diverse backgrounds and interests. Although there are many changes that need to take place to boost the effectiveness of language education in higher learning, restructuring at the administrative level is crucial if the problems related to large class size are to be ameliorated.

The exploratory nature of this inquiry, based on the perspectives of several

NESTs who worked at one university, makes it difficult to lay claim to the generalizability of its findings. Nonetheless, the findings provide clear evidences as to what makes it difficult to teach in relatively big classes and how these difficulties can be overcome from the NESTs' viewpoints. The discussion is thus believed to be largely applicable to and useful for many tertiary educational settings in which EFL courses are conducted to improve conversation/speaking skills with the help of NESTs. Insights gained here can help resolve two highly problematic aspects of class management, i.e., large class size and mixed levels of proficiency, as singled out by Chin (2002), and increase the effectiveness of English programs at such institutions.

In the broader context of education, class size or its reduction is "one of the most important and interesting educational issues in the world" according to Webb (as cited in Shin & Chung, 2009, p. 3). Clearly, class size deserves close attention, and quantitative research grounded on a sound experimental design is called for to assess the effect of class size on language teaching and learning in which NESTs play a role. For the design of such endeavor, the insights in this paper will be instrumental in shedding light on the nature of the problems related to large class size. As highlighted by Shin and Chung, there can be many variables that affect student achievement besides class size, every effort should be made to control the influences of the variables and take them into consideration when interpreting data.

Further research is also warranted to explore the NESTs' perspectives on EFL learners and their learning styles. To do so, a qualitative approach should be embraced in future studies to reflect the individual teachers' true concerns, context-specific or otherwise. At least, appropriate qualitative methods should be incorporated into the design of future studies to complement and elucidate quantitative data. In doing so, the concerns of NESTs can be well represented. A greater understanding of what concerns them can certainly help mitigate existing problems and enhance the quality of language education. Only by working closely with and listening to NESTs who have inadvertently taken significant roles in exposing Korean learners to

the English language and the cultures of English speakers, can we make the best of what these teachers can offer.

## THE AUTHOR

*Christian Y. Shin* taught at several higher learning institutions in South Korea. His interest areas include intercultural communication and language teaching. His recent publications deal with the perceptions of NESTs (2010, 2011) and practical ways of engaging language learners in extended discourse through storytelling (2010).

Email: manoflethe@hanmail.net

## REFERENCES

- Atkinson, R. (1998). *The life story interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bang, Y.-J. (2004). Certification of English proficiency, proficiency-based curriculum, and college English program: A consideration of students' and teachers' perceptions. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 9(2), 193-211.
- Chin, C. (2002). Native English-speaking teachers' perceptions of learning and teaching EFL in Korea. *English Teaching*, 57(2), 113-135.
- Choi, Y.-S. (2008). Practical tips for EFL native teachers and their employers in Korea. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 14(3), 29-47.
- Chong, D.-S., & Kim, H.-D. (2001). A study for the development of a university-level general [*sic*] English course. *English Teaching*, 56(4), 265-292.
- Doughty, C., & Pica, T. (1986). "Information gap" tasks: Do they facilitate second language acquisition? *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(3), 305-325.
- Dufour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Erlandson, D., Harris, E., Skipper, B., & Allen, S. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gang, J. S. (1999). On the effective utilization of native English-teachers at college level. *Inmungwahak [Liberal Arts]*, 6, 217-242.

- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 597-607.
- Grass, D. R., & Ilon, L. (2009). Successful integration of foreign faculty into Korean universities: A proposed framework. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 6(2), 183-204.
- Hong, S., & Jung, Y.-S. (2006). A study on the roles and responsibilities of native English teachers for the effective English education. *Modern Studies in English Language & Literature*, 50(3), 137-164.
- Hramiak, A. (2005). A method for analysis of data from online educational research. *Journal of interactive online learning*, 4(2), 82-93. Retrieved January 20, 2008 from <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/PDF/4.2.2.pdf>
- Hustler, D. (2005). Ethnography. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 16-23). London: Sage.
- Ju, Y.-D. (2002). An analysis of English courses for Liberal Arts programs of junior colleges: Focused on students attitudes in Daejon area. *Yeongeoyeongmunhakyeyongu* [English Language & Literature Research], 46(1), 121-140.
- Kim, I.-D. (2000). A study of teaching modes by native speaker teachers. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(1), 69-82.
- Kim, K. J. (2006). Examining roles for EFL teachers: From the Korean learners' perspectives. *Foreign Language Education*, 13(4), 23-45.
- Kim, K.-J., Shin, M., Yang, H.-K., & Kim, J.-W. (1999). Needs assessment of Korean university EFL learners: A case study. *Foreign Language Education Research*, 2, 1-28.
- Kim, S.-W. (2000). A study on the English education in Kwangwoon University. *Gwanggun Daehakgyo Inmunsahoegwahak nonmunjip* [Kwangwoon University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Collection], 29, 146-165.
- Kim, Y. (2004). Teaching English overseas: From EFL instructors' perspectives. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 10(3), 67-88.
- Koh, E.-H. (2000). A study on native English teachers in Korea: Teaching mode, effectiveness, responses [*sic*]. *English Linguistic Science*, 5(1), 549-562.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1991). Language-learning tasks, teacher intention and learner interpretation. *ELT Journal*, 45(2), 98-107.
- Lee, C.-I., & Dash, R. (2003). Critical analysis of problems associated with the learning styles and strategies of Korean students. *Journal of Studies in Language*, 19(1), 101-121.
- Lee, H.-J. (2001). The role of native English-speaking teachers in the Korean EFL education system. *Study of English Education*, 6(2), 33-67.

- Lee, Y.-H. (2003). Research on general education English curriculum in Osan College. *Haksaengsaenghwaryeongu* [Research on Student Life], 8, 79-94.
- Lee, Y.-S., & Im, H.-M. (2005). A study on the general English education. *Jungdeunggyoyugyeongu* [Research on Secondary School Education], 53(3), 257-276.
- Li, M. (2002). *Roles, expectations and pedagogical awareness: A case study of expatriate English teachers in China*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED475522)
- Li, M. (2003). Roles, expectations and pedagogies: Cross-cultural differences and implications. *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, 31(1), 63-81.
- Lim, J. (2006). A case study of General English course evaluation based on learner's [sic] needs analysis. *Modern English Education*, 7(2), 130-149.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Marshall, M. (1998). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13(6), 522-525.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Donnell, T. J. (2006). Learning English as a foreign language in Korea: Does CALL have a place? *Asian EFL Journal, Professional Teaching Articles*, 11, 1-27. Retrieved January 8, 2010 from [http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta\\_april06\\_TJO.pdf](http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_april06_TJO.pdf)
- Park, C. (2000). Peer pressure and learning to speak English: Voices from the selected learners. *English Teaching*, 55(4), 231-268.
- Park, G.-P. (1999). Research on the efficiency of English teaching by native speakers. *Studies in English Education*, 4(1), 183-195.
- Park, J.-E. (1997). Communicative freshman English teaching program by native speaker teachers. *English Teaching*, 52(1), 161-187.
- Park, S.-O. (1988). On the effective use of native speakers in English teaching. *Hongiknonchong* [Journal of Hongik University], 20(1), 101-117.
- Rao, Z. (2001). Matching teaching styles with learning styles in East Asian contexts. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 7(7). Retrieved January 23, 2010, from <http://itesij.org/Techniques/Zhenhui-TeachingStyles.html>
- Rha, J.-H. (2009). Investigating EFL college students' expectations of an intensive English camp and their affective involvements in the camp. *Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature*, 51(1), 189-209.
- Ryu, H.-Y., Hwang, S.-Y., Nam, E.-H., & Lee, M.-K. (2006). Learners' perception [sic] of contextual variables of their English studies. *Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature*, 48(4), 91-116.

- Shin, C. Y. (2010). Problems encountered by Western English teachers with the paperwork and feedback mechanism. *English Language & Literature Teaching, 16*(2), 147-168.
- Shin, I.-S., & Chung, J. Y. (2009). Class size and student achievement in the United States: A meta-analysis. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy, 6*(2), 3-19.
- Somekh, B., & Lewin, C. (2005). Glossary. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 344-349). London: Sage.
- Trochim, W. M. K. (2006, October 20). *Research methods knowledge base: Nonprobability sampling*. Retrieved May 12, 2009, from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/samprnon.php>
- Walker-Gibbs, B. (2004). No more bricks in the wall: Researching postmodernism, post-literacy and education. In P. Coombes, M. Danaher & P. A. Danaher (Eds.), *Strategic uncertainties: Ethics, politics and risk in contemporary educational research* (pp. 171-184). Flaxton, Qld: Post Pressed.
- Wiersma, W. (2000). *Research methods in education: An introduction*. Needham Heights, MA: Allan and Bacon.
- Won, E.-S., Lee, J.-B., & Jeong, D.-B. (2009). A survey of teaching stresses of native English teachers: Based on teachers engaged in N university. *English Language & Literature Teaching, 15*(1), 229-249.
- Yom, M.-S. (1999). Effective management of native EFL teachers in Korean educational environments. *Usongsaneopdaehakgyo Nonmunjip* [Journal of Woosong University], 2, 301-323.



