Understanding the Interplay between Context and Agency in a South Korean High School English Classroom

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the relationship between context and agency in the context of a South Korean high school teacher's English classroom pedagogy. This was explored through two semi-structured interviews with the teacher, which was transcribed and analyzed using the principles of grounded theory in order to obtain a bottom-up, empirically grounded understanding of the relationship. This approach identified a strong contextual influence in the form of Korea's national university entrance examination, which is a constraint on both the teacher and students, resulting in a high focus on receptive skills, and thus shaping both agents' own respective choices in English language teaching and learning with the end-goal of students' success on the exam. 'Passive agency' emerged as a theory to describe this insight. The paper concludes with a discussion about the implications of 'passive agency' for the possible future trajectories of students.

Keywords: agency, context, grounded theory, neoliberalism, South Korea, transitions

Introduction

I am an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) language instructor at Seoul National University where I encounter freshmen students who have transitioned through the South Korean high school system where the focus is geared towards maximizing students' performances on the '*Suneung*'—South Korea's university entrance exam (Roh, 2010; S.C.S., 2013). Internationally, the exam is known as the Korean Scholastic Ability Test (KSAT). In the case of testing English, to maintain objectivity in marking (Lee & Winke, 2013), the KSAT focuses solely on testing receptive skills, and as preparation for this, the teacher-centered grammar translation approach seems to be the favored pedagogy of English high school teachers as the teaching of productive skills, as preparation for the test, does not occur in state-funded education (Chung & Choi, 2015). Focusing primarily on receptive skills suggests that students may have less agency in English as their ability to focus on productive skills is being compromised (Jeon, 2010). As a result, it seems that South Korean high school students enter higher education with a shortage of skill foci that warrants further investigation.

Universities' pursuit of internationalization, which is occurring as a broad trend across various East Asian higher education contexts (see Altbach, 2006; Kam, 2006; Kimura, n.d.; Mok, 2008), results in South Korean freshman students focusing more on productive skills when they enter higher education (Nam, 2005). Therefore, as universities compete for world-ranking status (see Byun & Kim, 2011 for further discussion) and open more English medium courses, improving English academic competency, including productive skills, is becoming more important (Park, 2009). Nevertheless, I witness my students struggling with this shift in skill focus. As students transition from high school to higher education it seems they are often unable to take an active role in independently developing all four skills equally because they have experienced a lack of productive skill foci and have not been trained in autonomous language learning development in their high schooling (Li, 1998).

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Therefore, this experience of past agentive opportunities feeds into the students' current contextual settings as the concept of agency is also what you bring with you as an individual moving through time (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). In this paper my aim is to consider the context/agency interplay to further understand the role both concepts play in shaping KSAT graduates' preparedness for higher education. My understanding is based upon the perceptions of a South Korean English high school teacher as gaining access to South Korean high school students proved difficult.

Agency can be shaped by context and context can be shaped by agency, and together they are able to establish a positive dynamic for growth and development, so it follows that some type of 'imbalance' between them may constrain growth and development (Williams, 2013). By employing grounded theory, this study seeks to understand how contextual factors influence the South Korean high school learning environment, and based upon the perceptions of the teacher, the effects they have upon students' agency when they are given freedom to be independent in their higher education English learning.

With these goals in mind, my research questions for this paper are:

1. What contextual factors influence the styles of teaching used by a South Korean high school English teacher?
2. How do these factors influence students' agency for future success in the context of a South Korean University's English classroom?

The literature review, which follows, aims to contextualize my understanding of 'context' and 'agency' in relation to the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting where the research takes place.

Context and Agency

Context in EFL

Gao (2010) views context from a sociocultural perspective as interactions happening within "different layers of contextual reality [which encompasses the macro-social to the micro–institutional level as] a combination of culture, discourses, social agents and material resources or artefacts" (p. 153) that result in a multifaceted concept.

Oxford (2003) offers a more specific overview of what these 'different layers' encompass by providing five perspectives to increase our understanding of a context's multifaceted components: (1) as a literal setting; (2) as generalized conditions (e.g., EFL or ESL [English taught as a second language]); (3) as the interactions of learners within a particular cultural setting; (4) as a community of practice within a large social and cultural environment; and (5) as the role which ideological thinking transpires in interactions within a setting. From this we can see that Oxford views the components of contexts in EFL as tangible settings, as learner traits, and as sociocultural interactions, which also include political considerations.

Kennedy (1988) offers a more succinct perspective, which seems more accessible than the previous descriptions, by describing a context as consisting of six intertwined systems operating in a hierarchy. In order of dominance, this can be visualized as follows:

cultural → political → administrative → educational → institutional → classroom

This simple visualization enables us to understand how these systems influence each other. For example, if a context is viewed as a systematic interconnected hierarchy, this implies that the systems that are at the lower end of the hierarchy may be constrained by dominating influences from the upper systems. Tudor (1996) articulates this interrelation for us by using the term "macro-social pressures" (p. 137) to describe these constraints. On account of this, in the hierarchical system, institutional change and classroom innovation become limited. Rothery (2001) views context in a slightly different way to the previous hierarchical descriptions by describing it

as an ecological system whereby the organisms shape and are shaped by each other as this is a system that is "inherently transactional in nature" (p. 69). Returning to Tudor's (1996) interpretation provides a greater foundation on which to build our understanding of context specifically in EFL and is described pithily as an "educational framework [which is] shaped by the socioeconomic conditions of [a student's] home community and which will also reflect the attitudes, beliefs and traditions of this community" (p. 128).

In consideration of the above findings from the literature, the concept of a context in EFL may be described as an 'interconnected, systematic, layered, community', whereby the conditions within this community shape the factors that determine the physical setting where language is taught. To further understand how this occurs in the South Korean context, an overview of the attitudes, beliefs, and traditions in this EFL context is described in the following sections.

The South Korean EFL Context
The context I teach in is situated within the TESEP (tertiary, secondary, and primary) English language education sector, an acronym that comes from Holliday's (1994a) classification of the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession into two main sectors; the other sector is BANA (Britain, Australasia, and North America). Despite the geographical classification of the latter, within South Korean Universities, the promotion of communicative language teaching, and the growing presence of foreign instructors have resulted in BANA methodologies being the main frame of reference (Jambor, 2007). Holliday (1994a) provides further insight for why this happens:

> Because of the hegemony of the received BANA English language teaching methodology, and because there are few examples of high-status methodologies grown from the TESEP sector, the latter sector automatically becomes second-class in that it is forced to make difficult adaptations of methodologies which do not really suit. (pp. 12–13)

From this, we turn to consider the differences between higher education and high school English learning methodologies in the South Korean context.

High school English teaching is focused upon passing the KSAT (Choi, 2008; Hyams, 2015). Cultural values and traditions have shaped the dynamic in which students are tested in their university entrance exams. Due to a Confucian heritage a great deal of value is placed on self-discipline and the ability to absorb knowledge; therefore, testing dominates the educational system (Carless, 2011). In contrast, encouraging the development of critical thinking skills and personal self-reflection is also central within this heritage (Kim, 2003). Nonetheless, it is the former paradigm that seems to dominate the preparation for the KSAT, and within it the teacher is viewed as a figure of authority (see Littlewood, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003), and/or as a disseminator rather than a facilitator of knowledge. Accordingly, there are differences between higher education and high school English teaching methodologies; in the latter English is usually taught in large classes (Holliday, 1994b) through a teacher-centered grammar translation approach (Chung & Choi, 2015). With this methodological contrast, students' agency may differ between the two settings. To explore this, we first need to understand the notion of agency as a broader concept in EFL.

Agency in EFL
Oxford (2003) defines agency as "the quality of being an active force in producing an effect" (p. 80). In EFL, it seems this agency is evidenced as learners show autonomy in their additional language acquisition process. The author further states that it is the intentionality of the learners that makes them agents. However, Oxford also outlines the challenges in helping learners to develop their agency, as it cannot be construed as a gift to be given to learners. For instance, if learners are suddenly given full freedom to act independently in their learning, they may not know how to exercise this freedom as they have not been taught the skill-set to intentionally cope with this level of control. Therefore, the notion of agency concerns 'how a person acts' rather than 'having the ability

to act' as it denotes "behavior rather than property" (Van Lier, 2008, p. 171), and within the context/agency interplay, 'how a person acts' is mediated by contextual factors.

Palfreyman (2003) provides a comprehensive explanation for 'how' learners encounter agency by stating that often the literature on autonomy presents a contrast between background culture and individual agency and that through a sociocultural lens both merge, allowing learners to capitalize upon, or decline the opportunities that are presented to them in their social context. This view is supported by Van Lier (2008) who asserts "agency is not simply an individual character trait or activity, but a contextually enacted way of being in the world" (p. 163). The author further extends our understanding of a sociocultural perspective on agency, by categorizing it as: (1) learner/group self-regulation (or initiative); (2) interdependence through interactions in the sociocultural context; and (3) an awareness of the degree of responsibility to assume within the situation of the social context. Returning to Gao's (2010) sociocultural interpretation of a context, learners within it are described as "social agents [possessing a] sociocultural capacity [which involves their] micro-political competence in manipulating contextual conditions and social processes within particular contexts to create a facilitative learning environment, negotiate access to language competences and pursue self-assertion" (p. 26). The author further states that learners' willingness and their understanding of the conditions within the context are prerequisites for this undertaking.

By considering Palfreyman's (2003) 'encountering opportunities' perspective, Van Lier's (2008) 'self-regulation/awareness perspective', and Gao's (2010) 'negotiating access' perspective of agency we may summarize these as sociocultural interpretations of agency that involve a learner's will and capacity to make decisions, and therefore the essence of agency is learner choice. By exercising this choice, learners can show a degree of autonomy in their learning as they take responsibility for their studies, which, according to Cotterall (2000) is the foundation of learner autonomy; thereby, learners are often motivated to exercise their choice because of learning goals. Tudor (1996) examines the interplay of context within this choice by questioning the role of contextual constraints within these learning goals and speculating on whether learners' goals are self-motivated, or whether they are a by-product of the constraints within the context. In the discussion section below a more comprehensive understanding of the literature's description of agency in EFL emerges.

Based upon my findings from the literature, I understand 'context' to denote the realities and resources of a certain setting that operate in a social hierarchy, and 'agency' to denote an opportunity for students to achieve learning goals within this social setting. Accordingly, this understanding of the two concepts is my theoretical perspective for this research; with it, my aim is to understand the context/agency interplay, from the perceptions of an English teacher, within the sociocultural dynamics of a South Korean high school setting that my students are exposed to and the learning opportunities they are presented with in this pre-higher education context.

Methodology

My methodology was based on the principles of grounded theory, which through empirical research enabled the conceptualization of a core category that explained what is happening in the setting I was investigating. The core category was arrived at through a process of constantly comparing every component (emerging codes and categories) of the data to find similarities and differences. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory, but they disagreed on how the theory should be applied after its initial conceptualization. The Straussian paradigm promotes a systematic three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective) using deduction and validation. In contrast, the Glaserian paradigm is a two-stage coding process (substantive and theoretical) using induction and verification (Heath & Cowley, 2004).

I used an amalgamation of both paradigms to become familiar with the intricacies of the methodology. This involved the three-stage coding Straussian approach, but the analysis within these stages was inductive as opposed to deductive. By combining both paradigms, I aimed to limit my experiences and knowledge from shaping the emerging theory. However, my *a priori* theoretical perspective of context and agency resulted in an interpretive analysis approach as I positioned myself reflectively in the analysis; consequently, this method leaned

towards a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The intricacies of the social context were another factor relating to the adaptation of the amalgamated methodology as the conditions in the South Korean context being researched differed to the conditions in which Glaser and Strauss first developed grounded theory as a research method (Charmaz, 2014).

Initially, it was my intention to interview high school students. Attempts were made to gain access to learners, but busy schedules in preparing for the KSAT meant that students had no time to participate. Access to higher education freshmen would have been feasible; however, I had decided not to recruit as I felt their experiences of tertiary education could potentially compromise the full extent of their high school experiences. My engagement with the literature (Ewald, 2003; Exley, 2005; Ohata, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) suggested that teachers are in a position to provide an account of the behaviors and attitudes their students present in the classroom (this is discussed in more detail below). It was this insight that resulted in a teacher-participant being recruited.

My data sets emerged from two interview sessions with one South Korean all-girls high school teacher by using a semi-structured approach (see appendix A and B for details about the specific question schemes). The first data set was the initial interview, and the second was a follow-up interview to seek clarification and conduct further in-depth probing. Both of the interviews were recorded. The first lasted 66 minutes and comprised 689 lines of data, and the second lasted 61 minutes and comprised 501 lines of data. The first interview was conducted in person, and the second was conducted via speakerphone. To prepare the data sets for analysis both were transcribed. In this process, attention was given to the content of what was spoken rather than to the details of delivery because a grounded theory approach is more concerned with 'what is happening?' (Glaser, 1998) in the data. In focusing on the content, both interviews were transcribed verbatim with each turn occurring sequentially. By doing this the transcription conventions were simplistic as they involved including pauses and overlapping symbols, but symbols to represent pronunciation, intonation, and non-verbal utterances were not used. This was a response to the way I intended to use the data sets in line with my methodology; in other words, it was my intention to reflectively interpret the contents (Roberts, 2016). When completed, the transcripts were given to the teacher to read and to confirm that they were an accurate representation of what was said, which gave validity to the transcription process. This proved to be effective in the second interview as the transcript from the initial interview was given to the teacher to use to reflect upon the sections from the first interview that were being further explored.

The open coding process was empirically derived from the data, which limited theoretical constructs being imposed on the data that could potentially compromise the grounded process at this early stage. Even though a constructivist framework was being used, which promoted a reflective stance, awareness of my own preconceptions that could also affect the research was an integral part of the reflective process (Charmaz, 2006). Bazeley (2007) describes the empirical process as the data being able to 'speak' for itself. As the process ensued, operational definitions of the contained feature(s) in each code were clarified. This was done to reduce ambiguity and provide consistency (Miles & Huberman, 1984). These descriptions were logged into a codebook along with two examples of each code. As this process developed the codes were grouped into sets. The writing of memos was useful in creating these sets as they enabled me to reflect on emerging patters in the codebook and to interpret the analytical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that was under development.

Using the CAQDAS package, NVivo, facilitated simplicity in analysis as it made the data more accessible and transparent. Being able to see the categories established during the open coding process in this way enabled me to begin the axial coding stage of analysis. The manner in which the data was able to 'speak' for itself enabled me to see what was happening in the data. In other words, the constant comparisons of the categories first enabled the seeing of occurrences in the open coding process, and then through encoding, links could be seen between emerging and already established patterns, which was the beginning of the axial coding process. Therefore, during the axial coding stage, connections were being established between the ranges of categories identified in the open coding process as the codes were being merged together (Kendall, 1999). This led to the creation of new broader categories; the descriptions of which captured the shared features of the codes

contained in each category. During this stage, memos also enabled reflection on how the categories related to each other and assisted with the interpretation of the analytical process as a whole.

The paramount criterion that merge together to make a category acceptable for analysis are articulated by Richards (2003) as the conceptual coherence, analytical usefulness, practical applicability, and empirical relevancy of each individual category. By going through the above processes in my methodology, I believe that my categories were inclusive of these criterions. The ranges of axial coded categories were grouped together where shared commonalities were identified. This led to the development of new codes to label categories as belonging to a particular broader set, which led to the emergence of further insights that were approaching a core category.

Results

The results presented are based on the teacher's accounts of how the students behave in the classroom. Students' language anxiety (Ohata, 2005) and learner characteristics (Exley, 2005) have been obtained indirectly from teachers' accounts in past research, which inspired the use of the current methodology due to difficulty in accessing South Korean high school students to conduct interviews with, as outlined above. Depicted in Table 1 is a basic representation of how an excerpt of data developed through the three-stage coding process.[1, 2]

Table 1
Representation of Data Excerpt Development

Coded Excerpt
(I) ... Do you think that erm .. your students .. do they have the ability to be independent .. what I mean by this is do they have the like knowledge and the skills to be independent learners?   (R) Skills? .. err I think .. they .. just don't have experience to be independent learners .. but I think they have ability to be independent learners if they experience more skills or knowledge about independent study.

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Student Agency	Student Potential to Act	Potential Shaped
Memo: The above infers that students have the capacity to become independent learners, but there is something that is preventing them from accessing this experience and thus fully developing their agency.	Memo: Several categories have emerged in the open coding process that denote students as agents and having the potential to act. This potential often appears to be constrained by other prevailing factors.	Memo: The agents (the teacher and students) exercise their potential in quite a passive way as they are shaped by the prevailing constraints in the environment.

What is captured in the above example is how each stage helped me to reach the core category. It can be seen above that in the open coding stage the memo had a descriptive function. In the axial coding stage, the memo was used to reflect on emerging connections and patterns. Finally, an interpretation of what is happening in the data with regards to my research area emerged in the selective coding stage. It must be noted that parts of the above data excerpt were also labeled with other codes in the open coding process and that the axial code label, 'student potential to act' and the selective code label, 'potential shaped' included a wide range of other codes and categories. Both labels have been included in the above example to show how they related to the initial

open coding of 'student agency' and to give a simple example of how the methodology developed through the three stages.

When it emerged from the data that the teacher and students were being shaped in their potential to act by the prevailing constraints within the environment, I then coded both data sets with the codes of 'potential shaped' and 'potential to shape.' The former captured references to the potential to act that were shaped by the prevailing constraints in the high school environment whereas the latter captured references to the potential to act that aimed to challenge or change the prevailing contextual constraints. Seventy-seven references were coded as 'potential shaped' that comprised 18.66% of the first interview and 35.57% coverage in the second interview. In contrast, 'potential to shape' included twelve references with 2.09% and 2.04% of the first and second interview respectively. What follows (Table 2) are sample excerpts from each code to present how the core category was arrived at through data analysis.

Table 2
A Depiction of 'Potential to Shape' Excerpts

1.	I think school is trying to change the environment but the change is very slow little by little .. so it seems that it doesn't change …
2.	They [students] have the willingness ..
3.	I think after they graduate high school they can improve their skills more than based on what they learned in the old days when they were young.
4.	(I) So you have .. you have a lot of flexibility in your .. you can do what you want effectively in the class? (R) Yeah.
5.	(I) Do you feel pressured by your government policies? (R) No.

Due to space limitations, as I describe the emerging insights, I will discuss data excerpts that fit my core category. As mentioned above, I did not have access to students' voices, however, within the teacher/student dynamic, in past research, the teacher's agency has been shown to be quite influential upon students (Ewald, 2003; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Nevertheless, within the scope of my research, based on one teacher's perspective, there is limited data to state that the results of the analysis are generalizable for students as well. Therefore, the results presented and discussed are based solely on the perceptions of the interviewee.

In the five excerpts presented in Table 2, we see examples of how the potential to be active agents is described in the data. This means that the agents have the potential to use their agency to change or challenge the prevailing environmental constraints. In Excerpt 1, the school seems to struggle with this potential. Excerpt 2 increases our understanding of the students' will to exercise this potential, yet from Excerpt 3 the teacher seems to believe that students will not fully exercise their potential until they graduate from high school. From the final two excerpts it seems that the teacher believes that teachers also have the ability to exercise this potential, which suggests that the teacher feels the means to control the students. What is presented in Excerpts 4 and 5 above was the full extent of the insights into this belief from the teacher. Nevertheless, insights that seem to contradict this broad potential to shape the context emerge when we explore the excerpts presented in Table 3.

Evidenced in the extracts in Table 3 are some of the prevailing constraints within the environment that limit the teacher from exercising the potential to act. It seems that the teacher feels that the students need a more communicative focus to succeed in the future (Excerpt 6). This excerpt also provides us with an interesting insight of the teacher expressing a somewhat neoliberal understanding of language education. Additionally, the teacher places value on a student-centered approach to learning (Excerpt 7) which makes one a better teacher (Excerpt 8). Nevertheless, what seems to be dominating the approach to learning, in the teacher's perception of the high school context, is a focus on preparing for and passing the KSAT exam (Excerpts 6, 9, and 10), and because of

this the students do not get speaking opportunities (Excerpts 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). However, it should be noted that other researchers (Li, 1998; Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004) observe that opportunities to practice speaking in the target language are not entirely excluded as South Korean high school students study English.

Table 3
A Depiction of 'Potential Shaped' Excerpts

6.	Students are preparing for *Suneung* exam .. but they also have the need to communicate in English in the society .. nowadays the society needs global talent, global ability .. I mean .. so they need mass medias, internet, magazines, newspapers .. say English are the most important skills .. English is the most important skills in succeeding in the society .. to get great career in the society .. so I think students their first aim is to get good points in *Suneung* exam .. I think they have the need to communicate in English well in the future ..
7.	Nowadays ... in real class I think authority role is bigger than supporter's role .. but supporter's role is ... in ... more important I think in the class ..
8.	I show .. show myself a lot in class as a authority figure .. but I think I'm ... I want to be a .. I'm better for the supportive roles .. I think I .. I'm .. I'm .. I can do better when I'm in a supportive role than .. rather than authority ..
9.	.. they [students] are not given many chances or a good environment for speaking English and as I said before their first goal is *Suneung* exam ..
10.	.. preparing for the *Suneung* exam is the first goal in the class in high school .. so we just read the English text and then explain grammar in Korean, so I don't need to speak English in .. I don't need to speak English more of the time in class I just use English when I give short directions or when I read text in English ..
11.	*Suneung* exam needs the ability to solve a problem in a short time .. and for the *Suneung* exam we don't need to practice speaking or communicating each other .. so I think a teacher-centered class is more effective for the *Suneung* .. explaining and solving a problem and finding the fault and to make students get the right answers in a short time .. so they don't need communicative in *Suneung* ..
12.	They have to get good points in *Suneung* to enter the university they want .. so as I said *Suneung* is different from speaking skills. The goal of *Suneung* is not speaking test ..
13.	I think high school has less pressure about using English in class because there is a big goal of *Suneung.*
14.	(I) .. does it [teacher-centered approach] match the students' needs? (R) mm some of the ... some of the students .. don't like it, but most of them .. are ... most students follow the class well .. it's necessary for their future exam ..
15.	I think some students think a teacher based class is more effective especially for *Suneung* ..

The teacher describes the high school context as not "a good environment for speaking English" (Excerpt 9), yet, despite this realization, they seem to be influenced in the potential to act by relying on a teacher-centered approach to learning, as it's "more effective for the *Suneung*" (Excerpt 11). Additionally, according to the teacher's account, the students seem to share a similar perspective, as some of them appear to resist the teacher-centered approach (Excerpt 14), yet they seem to exercise their agency in using the approach to help them achieve their goal of entering university (Excerpt 15). When I asked why some students show resistance to the teacher-centered approach, the teacher stated the following (Excerpt 16):

Excerpt 16:
> (R) .. they look bored a lot ... even they ... some of them .. sleep during the class ..
> (I) .. right, right, right .. so they're not motivated with the approach?
> (R) .. yeah ... yeah ... yeah .. yeah ... so I can notice it easily ..

There is an implication in this extract that teacher-centered methods are inadequate in high school as it demotivates the students. Moreover, we may infer that the lack of motivation suggested in the above excerpt may be limiting their potential to act and change the prevailing constraints within the environment. It is important to note that their lack of motivation may not be solely based on the teaching approach; it could be due to other factors as well. However, irrespective of the cause for this, the clear indication is they have limited acting potential. As a result, what emerges from the data is an understanding of how both agents' (the teacher and the students) potential to act is shaped by the prevailing constraints in the high school environment. The main constraint that is presented in the data is a focus on passing the KSAT exam. Its domination was also quantified in the data through an Nvivo word frequency search (only words with a minimum length of 3 letters were included in the results). The word *Suneung* appeared 58 times, was the 15th most frequent word used, and comprised 0.55% of the total discourse coverage in both data sets combined.

The core-category resulting from the data analysis can be summarized as follows. The testing of receptive skills on the KSAT influences the acting potential of the teacher to use the teacher-centered approach, even though it is not favored as a methodology. Nevertheless, the teacher considers the student-centered approach as being impractical for the KSAT as "it takes more time to go to the goal."[3] As a result, the teacher's action potential to be an active agent and challenge the prevailing constraints is clearly limited as it is being shaped by the focus on the KSAT. Similarly, in the case of the students' potential to act, according to the teacher's account, some show resistance to the teacher-centered approach. Be that as it may, they seem to accept it as a methodology that will help them to succeed in the KSAT, and in this case their potential to act is being shaped by the prevailing constraints. Thus, both parties' potential to be active agents is limited. Instead, they are exercising their agency in a relatively passive way as they are shaped by other 'upper systems' (e.g., cultural, political, and administrative). In other words, the constraints are telling them to act in a certain way. The term 'passive agency' is the core-category that has emerged from the analysis to theorize the above findings. Further discussion about the intricacies of this theory is provided below by drawing on how the literature discusses traits that may be applicable to South Korean tertiary level students' exercise of agency.

Discussion

To reflect upon the first question, "What contextual factors influence the styles of teaching used by a South Korean high school English teacher?", I return to Kennedy's (1988) description of a context in EFL as six intertwined systems operating in a hierarchy that was presented in the literature review section:

$$\text{cultural} \to \text{political} \to \text{administrative} \to \text{educational} \to \text{institutional} \to \text{classroom}$$

Within this system, culture is depicted as the dominant hierarchy, and it was evidenced in shaping the theory of 'passive agency' in the analysis. The teacher uses the teacher-centered approach because "it's familiar"[3] and "kind of the traditional way"[3] (see Gray, 1998 for further discussion). This supports the perception of the South Korean teacher as a figure of authority, which was also outlined in the literature review section. Additionally, the data revealed how the TESEP setting also influences the teacher-centered style of learning. For instance, classes located within it tend to be large (Holliday, 1994b), and the teacher also commented that, "there's a big gap in the students' levels"[3], which seems to indicate that social inequality persists within the setting (Byun & Kim, 2010). Accordingly, the teacher feels that a teacher-centered approach is the most effective approach to deal with these conditions as seen by Excerpt 17:

Excerpt 17:

>.. I think teacher-centered class is more effective in large class .. it's one of the reasons why I think teacher's based class is more effective .. a lot of students in one classroom ..

What also emerged from the analysis was an insight into political influences behind the way the exam is formatted. It is multiple choice, which solely focuses on testing receptive skills as achieving objectivity is an important consideration in the sense that testing speaking and writing would have a more subjective nature as they would be "difficult to evaluate."[3] However, if students were tested in this way, they could potentially struggle, as "speaking and writing is their weakest skills."[3] There may be further reasons for this: the students may dislike writing; they may be inattentive in the class; the teacher may be unqualified to teach writing skills; etc. Nevertheless, these possibilities would require additional research to verify. Additionally, it seems that the objective standardization was implemented to eradicate corruption problems that had previously existed in the admission system (Lee, 2009). Nevertheless, as Lee and Kim (2013) indicate, testing students objectively through transparent measures means the focus in high school is on developing multiple choice test taking proficiency rather than autonomous approaches to learning. Despite using and focusing on the former, the teacher seems to place greater value on the latter and feels that ".. the necessity of expressing themselves is .. becomes more important nowadays."[3] Throughout the data analysis the teacher demonstrates awareness that promoting learner autonomy is more beneficial for students' futures, which seems to be related to the neoliberal understanding of education (Carter, 2010; Moltó Egea, 2014). Piller and Cho (2013) identify this understanding as being an "illusion of meritocracy" (p. 39) in South Korea. Park (2011) also supports this view of 'the promise of English' (i.e., the guarantee of a good career) as a fallacy, as English skills are not evaluated in their social context in the South Korean job market; instead, 'the promise' results in social distress and stifles the development of critical thinking skills (Piller & Cho, 2013), which may have the potential to limit students' future agency.

The teacher's potential to choose a student-centered style of learning and expose students to it is being hampered because all of the focus of high school English education needs to be channeled into enabling students to achieve success on the KSAT exam, and because of this the teacher seems to have little experience in teaching with a communicative methodology as captured by the following excerpt:

Excerpt 18:

>.. first students are preparing for the big exam *Suneung,* and secondly I think teacher, me, I, is not .. I'm not prepared for using English in the everyday lives … it's very difficulty to plan the class for the communicatively environment ..

The KSAT has been subject to some criticism (Lee & Larson, 2000; Seth, 2002; Sorensen, 1994). One of the problems outlined with the tests is that "language teaching is simply another subject on the curriculum, and must therefore work within the material and logistical possibilities available in the educational system as a whole" (Tudor, 1996, p. 131). The above may be viewed as a constraint as it limits the teaching methodology that can be adopted. However, Tudor (1996) suggests it forms part of the students' cultural identity within their home culture, and consequently students favor a teacher-centered methodological approach in their high schooling, as it is conducive to their purposes of passing the entrance examinations. However, in the analysis, the teacher has expressed some experience of students showing a degree of resistance to this approach. This resistance may be an indication of students exercising their agency within their social context as they feel the approach is not a part of their cultural identity. Benson, Chik, and Lim (2003) offer further insight into this by extending our sociocultural understanding of agency in EFL by describing it as learners exercising choice within their "situated experiences" (p. 58) of the social interactions of their communities. Accordingly, this aids our understanding of their exercise of agency as being "socially oriented" (Benson et al., 2003, p. 59). Therefore, we need to consider what comprises this 'socially oriented' agency.

The data has shown that the students have not been able to make many choices in the 'situated experiences' of their high school. Therefore, we may infer that they have no training to make choices that they may face in their future learning. In other words, their past contexts can affect their future experiences. Accordingly, by considering the historicity of the individual students we may deduce that it also matters what their previous experiences have been, and this may constrain their agency as well. For that reason, by focusing on the KSAT route this agency constraint remains with them as they transition into higher education. Thus, it does not seem to be the fact that it is their exposure to the grammar translation approach as preparation for the KSAT that has sole responsibility for their 'passive agency' as this might still be present even if their English acquisition had more of a communicative focus. Rather, the greater responsibility lies with the wider educational system (i.e., the macro context) as a whole. Moreover, within this macro context the neoliberal concept of education shapes the students' experiences. Kim and Lee (2010) provide an interesting insight into this by stating that in the past South Korean parents' spending on private tutoring has equaled the government's spending on primary and secondary education. On account of this market guided educational pursuit, we may deduce that students (encouraged by their parents) are making choices in their high schools to better themselves for the KSAT exam. With this in mind, we need to consider whether South Korean students exercise choice in other aspects of their educational pursuits. To explore this, we return to the literature to identify factors that may be applicable to South Korean higher education students' exercise of agency.

As mentioned above, the teacher claims to have experienced some students showing resistance to the teacher-centered approach. To understand additional causes for why they may resist, I compared my findings to the literature's understanding of the concept of agency concerning students located in East Asia. To begin this comparison, a further explanation of the core-concept of 'passive agency' follows.

'Passive agency' is predetermined acting in the sense that it is determined by contextual shaping. In the South Korean high school context, the classroom agents (the teacher and students) have the potential to act; moreover, they have the potential to forge a new path, but it may involve some risk taking. Consequently, students are given pre-determined action possibilities, which are set in advance by the operating past constraints within 'upper systems' of the environment and not by the present classroom agents. If they act based on these pre-determined action possibilities, they are acting passively as they are not changing anything. South Korean high school students act by focusing on one path, which is to pass the KSAT. Whether or not this interferes with the future trajectory of their English education needs further consideration. If high school students decide to continue their education at the tertiary level, with the rapid growth of English-medium classes being offered in their majors, they are exposed to a more communicative focused classroom, which exposes them to tasks that they may not have been exposed to in their high schools (Buyn et al., 2011). Based on my experiences as a higher education EAP instructor, it seems that a focus on more productive skills does not encourage students to forge new paths and become active agents as their assessment is based on pre-determined criteria that they strive towards. Therefore, it would appear that students learn passively in both the higher education and high school contexts. To understand if this innately reflects the students' agency I will present my further understanding of this concept based on my engagement with the literature.

In many past studies, a stereotypical view of East Asian learners has emerged labeling them as being reticent and passive, thus one might argue that they have been accepting of the ways in which they have been taught and tested as preparation for higher education. Nevertheless, Cheng (2000) argues that this label is a "groundless myth" (p. 438), as we need to look at the individuals within the culture rather than the culture itself (see also Guest, 2002; Horowitz, McLendon, Bresslau, Yu, & Dryden, 1997; Littlewood, 1999). Moreover, with this passive label, many generalize that Asian learners absorb knowledge from the teacher (Yook, 2013). However, Liu and Littlewood (1997) argue that they engage in an active, self-regulatory role in their pursuit of knowledge. They base this on their analysis of the two Chinese characters for knowledge, rooted within Confucian teaching, which denote 'learn' and 'ask'. Thus, due to South Korea having its educational heritage emanating from Chinese Confucianism, it could be argued that active agency, in the guise of acquiring knowledge, is a central principle of this heritage.

Cheng (2000) further states that the passive and reticent label of East Asian students is "situation-specific" (p. 435) as it could be caused by a lack of language proficiency, or exposure to a certain teaching methodology. Moreover, Littlewood (2000) observes that South Korean students (homologous to other students located in East Asia) have no "inherent dispositions" (p. 33) to nurture a passive role as societies conform to passivity rather than the individuals. The author further adds that being a member of one culture does not mean an automatic acceptance of its values, "it may simply mean bowing to them as unavoidable facts of life" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 80). From my observations as an EAP instructor, I am inclined to agree with Liu and Littlewood (1997) that under the current university entrance examination system, due to a lack of language proficiency, South Korean students have a "sense of unease [and a] self-perception of their own competence" (p. 376) with regards to their English skills after entering university. One of the causes of this was further highlighted in Excerpt 19:

Excerpt 19:
      (R) .. some students are afraid of taking a more communicative *Suneung* ..

      (I) The students are afraid?
      (R) Mmmmm ..
      (I) Why do you think they are afraid?
      (R) They are not much trained in speaking or speaking English in their life and their
          classroom ..

It seems to me that this sense of unease is caused by the prevailing contextual constraints that influence the students to have a rigid focus on their receptive skills as preparation for the KSAT. With this understanding, if context and agency are viewed from a sociocultural perspective, it is questionable whether the notion of a potential to change or challenge the prevailing constraints exists in the repertoire of the South Korean English language high school learner. Instead, they are encouraged to show responsibility for their learning through a dependency upon their social context (see Van Lier, 2008 for further discussion). Nevertheless, the literature findings above suggest that the students would be capable agents if they could freely exercise their potential to shape their social context. Accordingly, we need to consider what the implications will be for students if current practices continue unabated. Based on the outcomes of this research and my experiences as an EAP higher education instructor, it seems to me that high school students who enter higher education do not experience a significant shift in teaching methodology, despite a shift in skill focus, as they still follow pre-determined English-focused paths. As students who enter higher education continue to learn in this way, it may hamper their creative potential to becoming autonomous in their studies, which seems to be a greater focus of academic pursuits in East Asian universities (Chang, 2006; Park, 1997). Therefore, South Korean universities that offer more English language acquisition classes and English medium classes to compete for world ranking status should address this issue.

      The data analysis has revealed that the South Korean English language high school teacher involved in this research has been exposed to student-centered learning methodology when training to become a teacher, yet this learning style is ineffective in preparing students for the KSAT. Moreover, it seems that a change of skill focus in high school English language classes is some time away as plans to implement the National English Ability Test (NEAT), which proposed a focus on testing the four skills of English, have been permanently shelved (National English Ability Test, n.d.). In consequence, it would appear that the appropriateness of testing receptive skills through the KSAT will continue to be questioned for some time, and students may have no choice but to accept them as "unavoidable facts of life" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 80). Expanding the skill-set focus for the KSAT may prepare high school students for the challenges of productive skills in higher education. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily give them more choices to be active agents because their assessment would still be based on pre-determined criteria that they strive towards.

Conclusion

This research has provided an understanding of how the concepts of agency and context are interdependent as they shape and can be shaped by each other. Due to a focus on the KSAT, the classroom agents are unable to manipulate contextual conditions, or pursue self-assertion, which has a negative impact on their potential to act as it is being restricted through sociocultural conditions that are collectively reinforcing one trajectory that everyone follows.

The emergence of the core category of 'passive agency' implied that, social and cultural factors shape the conditions of the teaching environment and in turn influence the teacher's and the students' agency. From a sociocultural perspective, in the interplay between context and agency, the fact that the students' agency is constrained denotes imbalance, and thus the students become passive, and the passive aspect of agency is being shaped by the context. The constraints are external in the social context and internal in their experiences. Within this dynamic, the important question that needs to be addressed is whether students can break free from their experiences to become more active agents provided the context allows for it to happen. The answer to this question remains to be seen.

As previously mentioned, the outcomes of this research are based on the perceptions of one high school teacher, and the data was coded by only one researcher, which could potentially raise questions about the validity of the findings. To strengthen validity, future research could be conducted with an increased sample size (i.e., more high school teachers and the inclusion of data from higher education students), which would assist with the triangulation of the findings from this current research and could therefore give a stronger foundation to my theory. Data coding could also be verified by some measurement of inter-rater reliability. Nevertheless, the validity of the outcomes of this study, based on data from one teacher, needs to be considered. Within the teacher/student dynamic the teacher's agency is likely to be quite influential upon the students. For example, Skinner and Belmont (1993) discovered that teachers can influence student motivation, and Ewald (2003) observed teachers influencing students' moral behaviors. Therefore, if teachers' agency influences students, the teachers are likely to have an awareness of the outcomes of their influence. Thus, they are going to be in a position to provide an account of the behaviors and attitudes those students present in the classroom. It could also be argued that the teacher I interviewed shared commonalities and similar experiences to other high school teachers and therefore could be considered a representative (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) of other teachers teaching English in South Korean high schools.

I hope that the understanding gained from this exploratory research will also benefit other East Asian contexts, such as China, Japan, and Taiwan, where there is a dichotomy between the receptive English skills which students focus upon as preparation for their country's university entrance examinations to the detriment of a focus upon productive English skills. In conducting this research, I believe that the findings have implications for these other contexts where the university entrance examinations dominate high school pedagogy (The Transition from Secondary Education to Higher Education, 2015). In China, Japan, and Taiwan the university entrance examinations have acted as a constraint against the implementation of a communicative focus into their curriculums, which is washback to the teaching approach that is being used as preparation for the examinations (see Hiramatsu, 2005; Luxia, 2005; O'Donell, 2005; Sakui, 2004; Shea, 2009 for further discussion). It may well be the case that 'passive agency' theory also plays a part in this washback.

This research indicates that to create more active agents, it is neither a case of teaching all four skills together, nor of focusing on more communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches. Instead, it is a matter of allowing for individual trajectories. With pre-determined criteria that students strive towards, one is not going to get individual trajectories. Without these trajectories, 'passive agency' as determined in this study, will likely prevail.

Endnotes

1. The parenthesized letter (I) denotes interviewer and the letter (R) denotes responding participant.
2. In the data extracts, 3 period markers (…) refers to a section extracted from a turn and 2 period markers (..) refers to a pause of roughly 2 seconds.
3. These are verbatim data extracts. As they are quoted in their original form, some include grammatical errors.

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Appendix A – The Question Structure for the First Interview

1. Based on your experiences, what teacher centered learning and what student centered learning is happening in (high school /institutes)?　　　　　P

　　└─In your classes would you describe your students as teacher or learner centered? (1)　　　└─ P　　S

2. Can you talk a little bit about what experiences of teacher centered learning you've had?　　P　　S

　　└─ TEACHER CENTERED

　　　　─ has your main focus been prepping for the university entrance exam? (1.A)　　─ P　　S
　　　　　　└ do you think this prepares students for their future English language needs? (1)　　└ P　　S

　　　　─ have you been using the grammar translation approach? (1.B)　　─ P　　S
　　　　　　└ was this the methodological focus of your teacher education? (1)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　└ how does this approach suit your teaching style? (2)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　　　└ how does this approach match the students' needs? (3)　　└ P　　S

　　　　─ is teacher centered learning culture influenced? (1.C)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　└ what is the educational philosophy of most Koreans? (1)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　─ do Confucian values mean a teacher centered approach is to be used? (2)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　─ is this approach what parents expect to be the norm in high school? (3)　　P　　S

3. Can you talk a little bit about what experiences of student centered learning you've had?　　P　　S

　　└─ STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING

　　　　─ in what ways do classes have a communicative focus? (1.A)　　─ P　　S
　　　　　　└ what is your experience of teaching English in English? (1)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　└ do teachers have the ability to facilitate the approach? (2)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　　　└ are you provided with enough training to provide this approach? (3)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　　　　└ do you feel pressured by governmental policies? (4)　　└ P

　　　　─ in what ways does this approach match your students needs? (1.B)　　─ P　　S
　　　　　　─ does this approach prepare them to be university students? (1)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　─ does this approach make them better English speakers? (2)　　P　　S
　　　　　　　　─ is this the ultimate goal of the parents? (3)　　└ P　　S
　　　　　　　　─ are students motivated by this factor? (4)　　P　　S
　　　　　　　　─ is this the main focus of where they study (5)　　P　　S

4. Based on your experiences of the teacher and learner centered learning styles that we've previously discussed do your students show an independent attitude within each learning style?　　P　　S

　　　　─ do they have opportunities to enquire into their learning in your classroom? (1)　　P　　S
　　　　─ do they have the ability - i.e. the knowledge & skills to be independent? (2)　　P　　S
　　　　─ do they have the willingness - i.e. the confidence & motivation to be independent? (3)　　P　　S
　　　　─ does the role of the teacher (authority vs facilitator) help them to be independent? (4)　　P　　S
　　　　　　└ do teachers have the ability to carry out a student centered approach? (5)　　└ P　　S

5. What is your experience of students using English in / outside the class?　　P　　S

　　└ ENGLISH

　　　　─ is it used for teacher instruction? (1)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it used for productive output? (2)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it made through an autonomous choice? (3)　　P　　S
　　　　─ are they forced to use it? (4)　　P　　S

6. What is your experience of students using Korean in / outside the class?　　P　　S

　　└ KOREAN

　　　　─ is it used for teacher instruction? (1)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it used by students to articulate themselves? (2)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it used to question / explain difficult concepts by either the teacher or students? (3)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it used for negotiating form by students doing pair / group work tasks? (4)　　P　　S
　　　　─ is it used for negotiating meaning by students doing pair / group work tasks? (5)　　P　　S

KEY: P = prompted　　**S** = spontaneous

Appendix B – The Question Structure for the Second Interview

1. In the first interview you stated that in high school it is more difficult to plan for the communicative environment and it takes more time to reach your goal with a student centered approach. Can you explain your experience in relation to this statement?
   - Is the approach difficult to incorporate based on your students' abilities?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Does a *Suneung* focus prevent the implementation of this approach from being effective?　　　[P]　[S]

2. You also stated that confidence and free expression are more important in today's society rather than following instructions from other people. Can you explain why you feel this way and which of these do you mostly experience with your students?
   - Do Korean students have the confidence to freely express themselves?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Do Korean students have the ability and knowledge to freely express themselves?　　　[P]　[S]

3. Can you share your experiences for the reasons why your school has not yet adapted to a student centered style of learning even though you mentioned that in Korea there is a preference for this style of learning?
   - Is the *Suneung* focus in the way of this implementation?　　　[P]　[S]

4. Can you share your experiences for the reasons why you believe a teacher centered approach is better for the *Suneung* exam?
   - Will this change in the future with the implementation of the proposed NEAT test?　　　[P]　[S]

5. You stated it's more difficult to have students speak in the class. Can you share your experiences in relation to this statement?
   - Is *chae-myeon* a factor?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Are students grouped based on their levels?　　　[P]　[S]

6. You stated that when comparing the authority / expert role of the teacher against the supporter role of the teacher, you feel that the supportive role is more important. Can you share your experiences for the reasons why you have this belief?
   - Is this based on your own belief, or the outcomes of your training?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Is this based on what you feel your students need?　　　[P]　[S]

7. You also stated that you believe that you can do better when you are in a supportive role. Can you share you experiences for the reasons why you have this belief?
   - Do you think that this approach will motivate students more?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Are students bored with the current approach?　　　[P]　[S]

8. You also stated that you speak English for 5 - 10% of the class. Can you share your experiences for the reasons why this occurs?
   - Does your role involve explaining grammar points most of the time?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Is it hard for students to follow English?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Do you feel more comfortable in speaking Korean?　　　[P]　[S]

9. Can you share your experiences for the reasons why students rely heavily on their Korean when they are doing oral pair-work tasks?
   - Is it because they see their teacher using it often?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Do they use it to ask questions about the given task to each other?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Do they use it because speaking in English is their weakest skill?　　　[P]　[S]

10. You stated in the last interview that more and more students have the chances of practicing English when they are young. Based on your experiences why do you think this is so?
   - Were you referring to the skill of speaking English specifically?　　　[P]　[S]
   - Why don't they have these chances when they are in high school?　　　[P]　[S]

KEY: P = prompted　**S** = spontaneous

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