Envisioning possibilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications from English language teaching in South Korea

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally reshaped many aspects of teaching and learning. Here, we envision some possibilities that we have seen from remote teaching practices of two elementary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in South Korea. The article begins by explaining how the COVID-19 school closure affected English language teaching (ELT) in South Korea. Following this, we illustrate how the two EFL teachers responded by offering video-based EFL lessons for their elementary students. Drawing from their practices, we discuss the possibilities for English language teachers around the world during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | SHIFTING TO REMOTE TEACHING: A CASE IN SOUTH KOREA

In Korea, total remote teaching was implemented as a new school year began in Spring 2020. Unlike many school calendars around the world, the spring semester is the first semester of the school year in Korea, typically starting on March 2nd. The Korean Ministry of Education postponed the beginning of the school year several times and finally decided to begin the school year completely online, starting on April 9th, 2020. Since then, teachers have been busy reconfiguring their classes and conducting “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020, March 27). On May 27th, 2020, schools began to open in phases, but some have been closed again after reopening, while others have practiced blended teaching as we write this article in June 2020.

How remote teaching has been carried out has varied from school to school and from teacher to teacher in Korea. Some teachers have offered synchronous classes via video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom), and others have created online classrooms where students can engage in asynchronous learning activities. One special aspect of remote teaching in Korea is support from the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS), which is a public educational TV and radio network and has long offered a wide range of educational programs. EBS, with the backing of the government and the Ministry of Education, has quickly developed and offered online materials, resources, and learning platforms as a response to COVID-19, including EBS Online Classes for Grades 1–12 and the EBS Classroom.
(like Google classrooms). Many EBS online classes are prerecorded video lessons. School teachers use the EBS Classroom as an online platform and, while they depend heavily on EBS materials, many teachers have also taken advantage of a wide range of online tools, apps, and resources (e.g., Zoom, YouTube, PowerPoint slides, instant messaging apps) suited to their local contexts.

While the EBS materials are useful for many teachers, one critique of the content of the English program is that it tends to be geared toward middle-class students in urban areas, and not well suited for students from other backgrounds. Therefore, many teachers, like Ms. Oh and Ms. Banahan whom we describe below, opted to create their own EFL teaching materials that better fit the needs and English proficiency of their students.

3 | ENVISIONING POSSIBILITIES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

During this challenging time, we encountered two EFL teachers in a small rural elementary school, with only nineteen students enrolled across Grades 1–6. Ms. Oh is a nonnative English-speaking local teacher, and her coteacher, Ms. Banahan, is a native English-speaking teacher from England. They were willing to take the opportunity to redesign their material and reshape their practice. In a Korean elementary EFL context, formal English instruction begins in the third grade. English teachers tend to teach English as a subject across multiple grade levels, while general education elementary school teachers teach other core courses, such as Korean language arts, math, science, and social studies. Ms. Oh and Ms. Banahan typically coteach two 40-minute classes per week for Grades 3 and 4 and three classes for Grades 5 and 6, with six to seven students in each class. During remote teaching, they offered asynchronous lessons only (e.g., producing one or two video clips per week; see an example of their videos at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUl6ji_Jkgo), and thus what we describe as their remote teaching illustrates their asynchronous teaching. From their remote teaching practices and transition, we saw some possibilities for English language teaching during and after the pandemic.

4 | TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICES AND PEDAGOGY

The first possibility for English language teaching during and after the pandemic that we envision is that of translingual practices and pedagogy. We have seen both the teachers’ and students’ translingual orientation to communication and language learning in Ms. Oh’s context. A translingual orientation or perspective highlights that multilingual students, like the elementary EFL students in this context, always shuttle across multiple languages, communicate in hybrid languages, and foster multilingual competence (Canagarajah, 2013). Differing from a monolingual (e.g., using English only in ESL/EFL classrooms) or a structuralism-oriented traditional multilingual practice (e.g., using multiple languages—first (L1) and second (L2) languages in a more separate manner), translingual practices are more hybrid, dynamic, and spontaneous language and literacy practices that involve traversing multiple languages and orchestrating diverse semiotic resources and modes (e.g., speech, writing, pictures, sounds) for communication and self-representation (Canagarajah, 2013; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011).

Both teachers prefer to use their real names for this article.
In fact, neither the teachers nor the students in Ms. Oh’s teaching context used or knew the term translingual orientation, but we as researchers observed that, although unintentional, the teachers’ pedagogy often reflected a translingual approach. Both teachers sometimes used English and Korean in a more fluid manner in their videos. For instance, Ms. Oh added some transliterated words, like굿잡 (which is a word written in Korean, pronounced like good job) and review time—리뷰 타임 to the subtitles in the videos. Some subtitles included both English and Korean in a sentence, such as “I’d like the 음식), please,” “Scene number 네 번째 장면,” and “I’d like to visit 장소.” In addition, students showed their translingual orientation to communication and language learning. When teachers asked for feedback on remote teaching, some students asked to have subtitles in both languages because they would like to “compare the expressions in two different languages” and “understand the differences between the two languages.” It is notable here that students did not seem to see language difference as a barrier or problem. Rather they wanted to explore, learn, and navigate the language difference, which indicates the students’ translingual orientation given that a translingual perspective treats “language difference as a locus of meaning rather than a problem” (Leonard & Nowacek, 2016, p. 260).

Teachers’ and students’ translingual orientation allows for a new pedagogical possibility—translingual pedagogy. Admittedly, we do not know if the teachers and the students used English and Korean as separated codes or as a single holistic semiotic system. However, what is important to us is that they showed some translingual practices (e.g., mixing languages in a sentence) and translingual orientation to communication and language learning (e.g., interested in exploring language difference, treating multiple languages as resources, using all resources available for meaning making) to some extent, which encouraged us to further promote translingual practices and pedagogy (see Yi & Jang, in press, for concrete examples of translingual practices in an EFL classroom).

5 | COLLABORATIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

Another possibility that we envision for ELT is collaborative teaching with native English-speaking (NES) and non-native English-speaking (NNES) teachers in EFL contexts. Collaborative or team teaching is not a new concept in TESOL. Collaborative teaching research has shown that NES and NNES teachers tend to bring different linguistic and cultural knowledge and experiences to language teaching, which leads to significant benefits for students and teachers. Yet, some research has also revealed conflict and lack of genuine collaboration between the NES and NNES teachers (Carless & Walker, 2006; Jang, Nguyen, & Yang, 2010; Jeon, 2010; Park, 2014; Rao & Chen, 2020; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Ms. Oh’s and Ms. Banahan’s teaching context showcases effective collaborative teaching between a NNES local teacher and a NES teacher in an EFL classroom, which led us to further envision a possibility for ELT.

Ms. Oh and Ms. Banahan had more opportunities to negotiate their teaching philosophies and methods and to reflect on their online materials and instruction during remote teaching. In the process of designing and developing lessons and videos, they initially divided their roles according to their official positions and responsibilities and their linguistic and cultural expertise. Ms. Oh, as an official supervisor of Ms. Banahan and a leading teacher, designed an overall 2020 English curriculum for her classes and then selected lesson themes and important English expressions. Ms. Banahan then played a leading role in creating and finding stories and contexts that would best match these themes.

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2We add translations for some Korean words here: 리뷰 타임 is pronounced like review time but written in Korean. “I’d like the 음식, meaning food), please,” “Scene number 네 번째 장면 (meaning the fourth scene),” and “I’d like to visit 장소, meaning a place).”
and expressions. Together, they reviewed English expressions that would be more suitable for their students’ English proficiency. Ms. Banahan produced initial video scripts, and Ms. Oh revised them while considering her students’ linguistic and cultural knowledge. When they drafted scripts, they carefully considered their own language use. They deliberately planned the role-play, in which they both used their L2, something that did not happen much in face-to-face instruction. For instance, Ms. Oh asked questions in English (her L2) and Ms. Banahan answered in Korean (her L2). This arrangement of language use was only possible with careful planning during remote teaching, especially asynchronous teaching. After several discussions and script revisions, they practiced the dialogues and role-plays in the lesson before video-recording. Overall, both teachers seemed to engage in collaboration at a deeper level and became equal and productive partners.

Clearly, remote teaching during the pandemic has reshaped their teaching practices and experiences, in such ways as considering purposeful and effective use of their L2s, more frequent linguistic and cultural negotiations for the development of lesson plans, and performing more roles to create these lessons (e.g., a video maker). Their collaborative teaching through the purposeful use of L2s and more rigorously planned online lessons has positively impacted their students’ English language learning and shed light on the possibility of effective (online) teaching and learning in the team-teaching contexts.

6  |  CONCLUDING REMARKS

The shift from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning has challenged all of us—teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Such challenges reassert the opportunities to leverage our experience, interest, and knowledge as resources. In addition, both the pandemic and remote teaching have forced us to become more creative and collaborative in our instruction. Although we do not know the potential long-term impact of the pandemic and remote teaching and learning on students and teachers, if we continue to pursue quality instruction (e.g., translingual and collaborative pedagogies), we may be able to see some positive effects. We would like to invite our audience to join us in envisioning new possibilities for English language teaching and learning for post-pandemic education.

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