'Wicked' use of English slang in relation to identity development in an elementary EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT: This study examined how English slang is used and learned by EFL learners in relation to identity construction. A Korean elementary sixth-grade classroom was observed ten times in a non-participant way. Additionally, the students and the teacher were interviewed in a semi-structured way, and the students were asked to write journals concerning their in-class learning of English. The outcomes indicated that many variables affected - in a complicated way - the learners' use and learning of English slang in relation to identity construction. In particular, the processes of English slang use and learning varied depending on proficiency levels and types of classroom dyadic interaction. The teacher also influenced parts of such processes by instituting a practice of interpretation of learner identity in her classroom context. Based on the findings of the study, implications are suggested.
Keywords: learner identity construction, EFL learners, L2 slang use, L2 slang learning.

El uso del argot en relación al desarrollo de la identidad en un aula de educación primaria

RESUMEN: Este estudio examine como el argot en inglés se aprende y se emplea por parte de los estudiantes en relación a la construcción de su identidad. Un grupo de alumnos coreanos se observó sin intervención del investigador. Por otra parte, se llevó a cabo una entrevista semi-estructurada con los alumnos y la docente, y se les pidió a los estudiantes que escribiesen diarios sobre lo que habían aprendido en clase. Los resultados indicaban que muchos variables afectaban de manera compleja al uso y aprendizaje del argot en inglés en relación a la construcción de la identidad. En concreto, los procesos del uso del argot en inglés y el aprendizaje variaban dependiendo de los niveles de competencia en L2 y de los tipos de intervención didáctica. La profesora también tenía influencia sobre determinados aspectos de tales procesos mediante la práctica de su propia interpretación de la identidad del alumnado en su contexto de aula. Basado en estos resultados se sugieren implicaciones pedagógicas.
Palabras clave: Construcción de identidad del alumnado, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, el argot en la L2, el aprendizaje del argot.

1. INTRODUCTION

The worldwide prevalence of Anglo-American popular culture has substantially influenced English as a foreign language (EFL) learners (e.g. Leppänen, 2007; Grau, 2009). In particular, this prevalence has exposed EFL learners to English slang - as suggested in Charkova (2007) - which [according to Dumas and Lighter (1978)] often includes taboo words and expressions. The inclusion of taboo words and expressions has generally prevented EFL teachers from teaching English slang (Charkova, 2007). In parallel, the classroom has been claimed not to be the most critical context (Berns, *et al.*, 2007) for English slang learning. Considering that the classroom could (generally) be the only context where EFL learners are encouraged to use English, however, a focus on the in-class use and learning of English slang also appears to be warranted.

According to Charkova (2007), whose study represents one of the very few prior studies and yet paid little attention to the classroom learning of English slang, Bulgarian high school and university EFL learners' knowledge of English slang was surprisingly large. Charkova suggested that these learners' desire to enjoy global youth culture could have been responsible for the extent of such knowledge (gained mostly from sources outside classrooms).

Interestingly, Leppänen (2007) found that elementary EFL learners were also influenced by global youth culture. It has been implied that an affiliation with global youth culture could lead to the use of American slang (Androutsopoulos, 2014). The resultant possibility of EFL learners' use of English slang in elementary classrooms (without relevant teacher input) seems to deserve a new research focus to help formulate a more complete mapping of EFL learners' use and learning of English slang.

Regarding the research topic of elementary EFL learners' slang use and learning, it appears that the issue of identity should be addressed. This need is underscored by the fact that language, culture, and identity closely interrelate (Hawkins and Norton, 2009). The need is also underlined by the fact that identity relates to the relationship between an individual and the world surrounding her/him (Park, 2012). In particular, the latter relationship of identity appears to highlight the socioculturalist view that learners' identity formation affects language learning, language learning being a social act (e.g. Donato and McCormick, 1994). It is hoped that the present study, aimed at filling the empirical gaps by examining Korean elementary students engaged in classroom interactions, will report results that describe and explain these EFL learners' use and learning of English slang which could interrelate with the (re)construction of their learner identity, as well as suggest pedagogical implications for Korean and other EFL contexts in Asia, and perhaps elsewhere.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Slang has been asserted to pose difficulties with attempts to describe it (Charkova, 2007). Citing Eble (1996), Charkova attributed these difficulties to the complicated sociolinguistic factors affecting the formation and use of slang. According to her, slang has been viewed as a type of language that is "*informal, casual, nonstandard*, and *colloquial*" (370), and "*short-lived, vivid, playful, faddish, vulgar, taboo*, and *racy*" (370) (italics in the original). She

explained, however, that even these descriptors are inadequate to identify if a term is slang.

Dumas and Lighter (1978) contended that slang substantially deprives formal oral or written communication of dignity and is usually avoided in high-status settings. Additionally, Dooly (2006) suggested that slang could have counter-effects when used with those who are not friends. It has been suggested that the potential violation of these collective practices of the target culture community by EFL learners could likely lead to undesirable consequences (e.g. Janicki, 1985). In particular, the inadvertent cases of loss of face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) seem to merit attention. Concerning the issue of face, Haugh (2007) claimed that identities negotiated discursively relate to the achievement of face through interaction. Haugh examined L2 Japanese learners' use of Japanese addressee honorifics. It appears that the use of L2 Japanese honorifics and the use of EFL slang could differentially influence the respective learner group's identity construction.

The sense of empowerment which could accompany EFL learners' use of English slang, as has been implied in the case of L1 English students in the UK (Thorne, 2004), could reduce their sensitivity to the issue of face. Brown (1991) stressed that empowerment, referred to as allowing learners to contest societal efforts to maintain their passivity, is promoted by intrinsic motivation in relation to learning for self-realization and individual interest. Additionally, motivation has been asserted to be interconnected to identity (e.g. Gao and Lamb, 2011). The resultant interrelationship between empowerment and identity appears to indicate the possibility that EFL learners' use of English slang could affect their identity construction processes in interesting ways.

EFL learners tend to undergo identity construction in various forms (e.g. Chik and Breidbach, 2011; Lamb, 2011). Further, Wenger (1998) claimed that identity, definable as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton 2000: 5), is constructed in a sustained and dynamic way throughout one's life. The on-going and dynamic properties of identity construction seem to parallel that of language learning. It has been found that second language (L2) learning will influence learners' identities (e.g. Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). Consequently, it seems that L2 learner identity construction could require considerable adjustments/shifts in direction and content. Interestingly, target language popular culture could be utilised for identity construction in classrooms (Duff, 2002), although the learners' L1 identities could be threatened by an excessive focus on developing native-like cultural competence (Nayar, 1997).

Concerning target language popular culture related to the EFL context, Menard-Warwick defined it as "music and film/video commercially available" (2011: 262) in her study that examined relationships between English language popular culture and identity development in Chile. Additionally, Menard-Warwick asserted that many EFL learners consume English language popular culture without making efforts to comprehend it. This failure to clearly understand English language popular culture, mostly Anglo-American culture, on the surface or deeper level, could influence EFL learners' identity construction in important ways. The effect of this lack of understanding could be considerably salient in the area of English slang which Anglo-American popular culture provides and which consists of taboo words/ expressions (Yule, 2010). In relation to taboo words/expressions, Moore (2012) distinguished slang and swearwords. According to him, slang lexemes are ephemeral and characteristic of particular social subgroups, while swearwords are taboo lexemes which are well known

in the speech communities where they are used, do not change quickly, and are considered taboo because of their semantic relationship to emotionally charged entities involving human waste and sexuality.

Considering the mutability of learner identity (e.g. Bodine and Kramsch, 2002), it seems that the construction processes of learner identity could interact with English slang use differently according to the types of classroom dyadic interactions; i.e., teacher-student or student-student. This focus on classroom interactions could be warranted because EFL learners are likely to use English slang inside classrooms. Specifically, their opportunities to use English (slang or not) are limited to classrooms in Asia (Butler, 2011) and, perhaps, in other EFL contexts. Additionally, it appears that a proficiency level could influence EFL learners' learning of English slang differently depending on the presence of the relevant comprehensible input; i.e., the lower-level learners' learning of English slang could be more contingent on the availability of the comprehensible input (provided by peers) than that of the higher-level learners. Moreover, Charkova (2007) found that peer-group integration was among a great number of socio-psychological factors affecting L2 slang learning.

Of the two types of classroom dyadic interactions mentioned above, teacher-student interactions seem to be where culture-specific variability could more likely be found. East Asia, in particular, has long followed the Confucian pedagogical precepts, including obeying patriarchal authority [which relates to the mandate to respect teachers' authority (Rutledge, 1992)] (Kim, 2009). This distinct feature could distinguish the construction processes of East Asian learner identity in interaction with English slang use from those of the identity of learners in Western or other EFL settings. Such possible influence of a macro-ecological factor of culture could complement the findings of Charkova's (2007) study, one of the very few relevant prior studies.

Concerning East Asian EFL settings, it appears that investigations of the Korean setting could produce interesting findings and beneficial suggestions. Korea has long experienced the so-called "English Fever" (Jeong, 2004: 40). While the global interest in English learning/ teaching now seems also to have reached the intensity level of fever, the extreme nature of the Korean situation appears to be unparalleled and is exemplified by surgeries performed on young children's tongues to enable them to approximate native-English-like pronunciations (see Demick, 2002). Given that the importance of English is expected to gain further momentum, a close look at the Korean EFL setting could be crucial.

The most critical aspect of EFL classroom teaching in Korea could be the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Notwithstanding the difficulties involved in its actual implementation (Butler, 2011), CLT has strongly influenced the elementary EFL classroom (Butler, 2005). Not only does CLT encourage students to move about more freely, but it provides them with opportunities to overly engage in discussions which do not contribute to the goal of improving their communicative competence (Butler, 2011). It seems that these factors could potentially cause the students to use and learn English slang in relation to identity construction while engaging in classroom interactions. There have been newspaper reports of Korean elementary students' use of English taboo words in class (e.g. Korea JoongAng Daily, 2012). Further, the students' enthusiasm toward the omnipresent Anglo-American popular culture, including subtitled movies, is considerable (Kwak, 2013) as in other EFL settings. Because of these, there appears to be the possibility that some of the elementary students - to an extent similar to that of secondary EFL students - could

use and learn English slang; and these elementary students could practice a method which resembles what Taguchi (2011: 910) termed "inferential comprehension". Concerning the new research into Korean elementary EFL learners, proficiency dependent use of English slang in the classroom and its interaction with learner identity construction could be profitably studied to identify how English slang use is affected or neutralised by proficiency. As in the case of the adequacy/inadequacy of opportunities for English use, an examination of the role of students' English proficiency could confirm/disconfirm the possible predictability of findings: whether higher proficiency results in more use of English slang deriving from a deeper knowledge of it (Charkova, 2007).

Considering the points discussed above, the following research question was examined in this study:

How do elementary EFL learners at different proficiency levels use and learn English slang in different types of classroom interactions in relation to their identity construction?

3. Rᴇsᴇᴀʀᴄʜ ᴍᴇᴛʜᴏᴅ

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 29 students (16 male, 13 female) in a sixth-grade classroom in an elementary school in Seoul, Korea. Their female, non-native English-speaking teacher also participated in the study. The school was located in a neighbourhood regarded generally as neither affluent nor poor.

The students (mean age = 11.79, SD = .412) were assigned to either a high-level (seven students), intermediate-level (13 students), or low-level (nine students) group. Richards and Schmidt (2002: 292) asserted that language proficiency - which they defined as "the degree of skill with which a person can use a language" - could be measured by employing a proficiency test. It was found that the students (the school's decision) had all taken the 'Flyers' level of the Cambridge Young Learners English (YLE) tests - which generally aims at EFL learners aged nine to 12 - in November, 2014 (approximately four months before the conduct of this study). Considering that the YLE tests were designed to specifically and comprehensively measure the EFL skills of young learners unlike the few other available tests (Bailey, 2005), it was decided that the first criterion for the student grouping would be their scores on the YLE tests. A test-taker of the YLE tests, which are not pass/fail examinations, is given 'shields' which display how well she/he has done in each of the listening, reading and writing, and speaking components. The number of shields for the test-takers ranges from one to five; the weakest test-takers achieve one shield for each of the three components (consequently a total of three shields), while the test-takers who obtain full or near full marks achieve five shields (thus a total of 15 shields). It was found in this study that six students had achieved five shields in each of the components, 15 students three shields, and eight students one shield. The researcher of this study consulted with educational testing experts concerning this, as he found that prior research had not addressed how to use the YLE test scores for proficiency-dependent grouping purposes. According to the

experts' advice, the researcher made the grouping, as above. The second criterion was the teacher's holistic assessments of the students' English proficiency. There were consistencies found between the two criteria. The sixth-graders, who studied English three times weekly in 40-minute periods, had already received English instruction for three years; twice (in the third and fourth grades) and three times (in the fifth grade) weekly in 40-minute periods. Incidentally, none of them had participated in study-abroad programs for English learning or gone to school in L1 English-speaking countries. Further, none of them was found even to have been to an L1 English-speaking country.

The teacher, in her late-thirties and with 16 years of teaching experience, had taught English for 10 years. She self-evaluated her EFL proficiency level as intermediate. Additionally, her EFL level was also judged intermediate by the researcher, two peer reviewers, and two native English speakers (NESs) who either/both impressionistically evaluated her during observations or/and analysed the transcribed data.

3.2. Data Collection

Before undertaking this study, the researcher requested three study groups for Korean elementary EFL teachers to recommend prospective research sites. Through his persuasion that their cooperation would produce valuable findings, one of the teachers at the recommended schools agreed to collaborate. The teacher obtained the consent of her school principal and the parents of her students. The researcher imparted the study purpose to the teacher, students, and parents partially and indirectly, to prevent the unwanted effects of the 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1972).

The research data were collected between the beginning of March and mid-July, 2015. Non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and journal writing were used as data collection methods. Observations of the classroom were made ten times, once bi-weekly. During the observation period, the students engaged in a total of eight group tasks designed to strengthen their learning of textbook content. The teacher assigned students of different proficiency levels to each group. Group membership, i.e., which students were assigned to each group, differed across the eight tasks. To record the classroom interactions, the researcher only used audio-recording and note-taking because the teacher asked the researcher not to use the other means of recording. Further, for the audio-recording of group tasks, the researcher prepared and installed eight high-quality recording devices.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Korean twice, with the teacher and with the students. The interviews, which were held before the first observation and at the end of the tenth observation, each lasted approximately two hours for the teacher and 20 minutes for each student. The goals of the pre-observation interview were to gain some understanding of the personal backgrounds of the students/teacher and to build rapport between the researcher and the students/teacher. The post-observation interview focused on confirming, from the perspectives of the students/teacher, what had been observed, interpreted, and analysed. The interviews were all audio-recorded. The researcher exercised considerable caution to ensure that the interviewees would not be influenced to give answers preferred by him.

The students were also required, once a week, to write journals in Korean through which they could communicate their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their in-class learning of English. It was expected that the use of journal writing could provide aspects

of the construction of the students' learner identity in interaction with English slang use and learning not captured by observations (Allwright and Bailey, 1991) or interviews. The audio-recorded classroom interactions and interviews were transcribed verbatim; and, when the transcriptions were in Korean, translated into English for reporting. The journal entries in Korean were also translated into English for reporting. A professional Korean-English translator confirmed the translations. A tabulated quantitative report of the heretofore discussed data collection methods is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The frequency, timing, and duration (observation and interviews)
of the data collection methods

Data collection method	Frequency of occurrence	Timing (period) of occurrence	Duration of each observation/ interview
Non-participant classroom observations	Once (every other week)	From the beginning of March to mid-July, 2015	40 minutes
Semi-structured interviews			
Pre-observation	Once	Before the first observation	Approximately two hours (with the teacher) and 20 minutes (with each student)
Post-observation	Once	At the end of the tenth observation	The same as the pre-observation interview
Writing journals	Once (every week)	From the beginning of March to mid-July, 2015	.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data from the transcribed classroom interactions were analysed using interaction analysis (Jordan and Henderson, 1995, cited in Helstad and Lund, 2012). According to Helstad and Lund (2012), a crucial assumption of interaction analysis is that knowledge emerges due to interactions among members of a certain community, mediated by talk. Further, they stressed that interaction analysis results in an understanding of the dynamics and complexity of human interaction. Concerning interaction analysis, the researcher focused on dialogic episodes. The data from the interviews and the journal entries were coded and thematically analysed. The analysis processes involved labelling concepts/themes which formed from the data and inter-connecting categories to create more general, larger categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

Interestingly, answers to some interview questions and the content of some of the journal entries were revealed to be considerably similar across proficiency levels while answers to some other questions and the content of some other journal entries were almost

identical across the members of each level group. Consequently, it was decided that the representative answers/content would be employed together with other data in reporting the results of the study.

In addition, the researcher calculated the incidence of the EFL learners' use of English slang according to types of classroom interactions and levels of proficiency. During the data analysis, the two peer reviewers - teachers in other elementary schools with masters' degrees in TEFL - were consulted to review the researcher's analysis and provide feedback.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Elementary EFL Learners' Use and Learning of English Slang in Student-student Dyadic Interactions in the Classroom in Relation to Their Identity Construction

During the observed classes, the total number of English slang terms used by the EFL learners was eight. The eight terms differed in the number of occurrences: six times (*wicked, What's up?*), five times (*F*** you!*), four times (*s****)*, three times (*chill out, bitch*), twice (*suck*), and once (*supa-dupa*). These terms (except for *wicked* and *supa-dupa*) are among those addressed and identified as slang in Charkova's study. In the classroom, teaching English through English (TETE) was practiced. The teacher and the students used English most of the time. Further, the students' proficiency level determined the extent of their English use: the higher their proficiency, the more English they used. In terms of the proficiency levels, interestingly, the intermediate-level learners used more slang terms (22 times) than the high-level or low-level learners (eight and zero times, respectively). The reasons for these differences will be explained later in this subsection.

Concerning the types of classroom dyadic interaction, a higher number of usages of slang were used in student-student interactions - i.e., group tasks - than in teacher-student interactions (28 and two, respectively, out of 30). The reasons for the difference will be discussed later in relation to the perceptions of the teacher under study in the next sub-section. As for the proficiency dependent differences in the two types of interaction, the intermediate-level learners used slang terms only in the student-student interactions, while the high-level learners used slang in both the student-student and teacher-student interactions.

The overall low incidence of use of English slang was attributed to the learners' awareness of the contextual limitations of English slang use. Charkova (2007) found that the high-intermediate to advanced EFL learners in Bulgaria were highly cognizant of such limitations. While L2-use norms have been suggested to be difficult to access for elementary language learners in many areas (e.g. Chan, 2010), the students in this study were reluctant to use English slang. Through the interviews, this reluctance was found to derive, for the high-level learners, mostly from the inappropriateness of slang use in classrooms they perceived as linguistically and culturally universal. On the other hand, the lower-level learners were influenced by their teacher's disapproval of in-class use of English slang. Particularly noticeable was that the majority of the low-level students also cited their inadequate relevant linguistic resources. Folse (2006) asserted that ESL learners' limited vocabulary know-

ledge hinders them from communicating effectively in English. Although the impact of the Anglo-American popular culture intuitively appeared to have broadened elementary EFL learners' knowledge of English slang, the findings of this study could confirm the existence of proficiency dependent differences in the heretofore underexplored area of elementary EFL learners' learning of English slang. The inadequate linguistic resources were also cited by the intermediate-level learners, although to a lesser extent.

What differentiated the intermediate-level from low-level learners was that many of the intermediate-level learners were eager to learn the English slang terms provided by the high-level learners. Excerpt (1) below exemplifies how *bitch, suck, wicked, What's up?*, and *chill out* were provided and learned.

Excerpt 1: *Student-student interactions*

S1*:	(looking at the fictitious map spread before the group members seated in circle) Let's find the restaurant. I will ask you (pointing to S2) first.
S2*:	Go ahead.
S1*:	Where is White Street?
S2*:	Well, go straight and turn right.

S1*	Wicked!
S3:**	Uhm, what is 'Wicked!'? I really want to know.
S1*:	It is the same as 'Very good!'
S3:**	(repeating the word) Wicked! Wicked!
S2*:	Now, I'm going to ask you.
S3:**	(smiling) My answer will be wicked!

* *high-level student, ** intermediate-level student*

In Excerpt 1, S3 uses the English slang word *wicked* after learning it through the brief student-student dyadic negotiation of meaning. This particular mode of learning of slang also takes place in the other group activities during which the intermediate-level learners were exposed to the high-level learners' slang use. The mode of learning was found to relate to seeking covert prestige and respect. Trudgill (1972) defined covert prestige, a sociolinguistics term, as a tendency toward non-standard forms of speech as expressions of affiliation with a specific speech community. In the interview, S3 stated the reasons behind his learning and use of English slang.

Excerpt 2: S3's report

Kids good at English use these certain words such as *wicked* that the teacher doesn't teach. When the teacher hears the words, she says we shouldn't use them because they are not 'formal' and 'appropriate'. Anyway, the kids say that they've learned the words in movies or American pop song lyrics. Kids like me, not so good at English, really want to learn and use them. When we use them, those kids treat us well. They don't look down on us. Additionally, the kids worse than us - that is, poor at English - look up to us.

The dual motives for S3's learning and use of English slang (i.e., seeking acceptance and respect from peers) have also been identified in Charkova. Interestingly, the efforts made by the intermediate-level learners in the present study, despite their teacher's disapproval of English slang use, led ultimately to their attempts to obtain respect from their lower-level peers in terms of their English abilities in general. By contrast, the high-intermediate to advanced EFL learners in Charkova's study focused on gaining respect in areas, including music and movies. Regarding the intermediate-level students' efforts, which influenced their slang use, several of them observed that their learning of English slang encouraged them to invest more time in English study because of the level of attention they received by using English slang. That is, their initial attempts at seeking acceptance and respect from their peers had extended to attempts to sustain acceptance and respect through a commitment to studying more diligently what their English teacher taught. This finding seems to show that "the peer-centered mentality" (Charkova, 2007: 403) could be considered a positive factor from the motivation and identity perspectives.
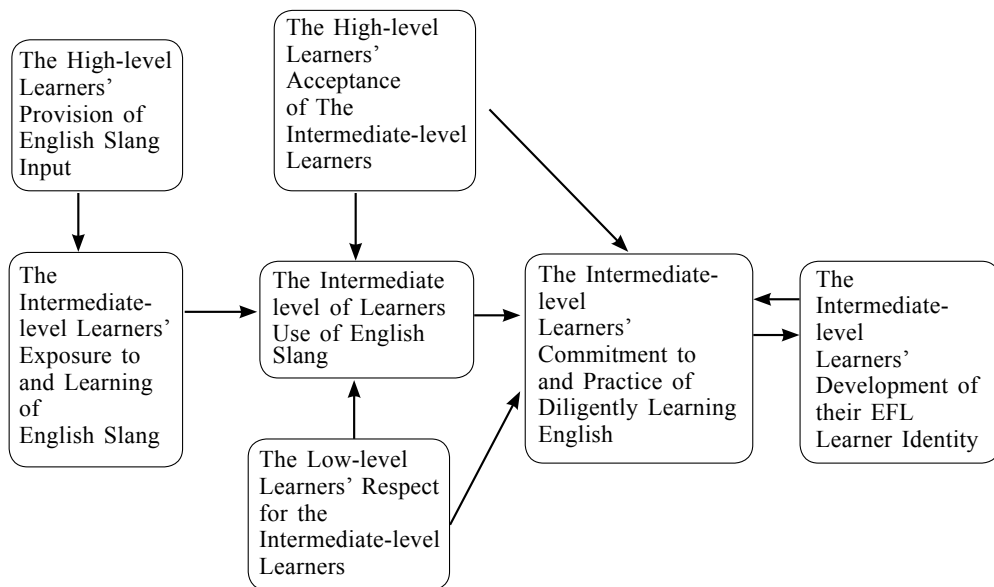
Specifically, the commitment of the intermediate-level learners seems to relate to L2 motivation (Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh, 2006) which is dynamically co-constructed with identity (E. Ushioda, personal communication April 4, 2012). Norton (2000: 5) defined identity in three respects, one of which was "how the person understands possibilities for the future". The intermediate-level learners entered in their journals that they expected to have a brighter future because of their more diligent learning of English resulting from their reinforced motivation. They reported that, as fifth-graders, they had paid little attention to the English slang input provided by their high-level peers. They suggested that they had not been able to notice the facilitative role of learning and using English slang in increasing their motivation and developing their EFL learner identity. Krashen (2003) maintained that intermediate-proficiency learners are those who have developed language knowledge and are ready to carry on with developing their language skills unaided. Concerning intermediate-proficiency learners' readiness, Neufeld's (1979) readiness variables should be considered. According to Neufeld, readiness for language learning involves language learners' openness to language learning and eagerness to participate in the process of language learning. Although the intermediate-level learners in the present study enlisted aid from their higher-level peers, they utilised it as a form of priming catalyst and enthusiastically engaged in their language learning processes (see Figure 1).

The absence of beneficial effects of English slang use and learning on the high-level and low-level learners was found to be related to their proficiency levels; they studied or did not study English diligently regardless of English slang.

4.2. Elementary EFL Learners' Use of English Slang in Teacher-student Dyadic Interactions in the Classroom in Relation to Their Identity Construction

The use of English slang related to learner identity development occurred differently during the teacher-student interactions than during the student-student interactions. First, (as mentioned earlier) during the teacher-student interactions, only two English slang terms - *wicked* and *s**** - were used. These terms were used by the high-level learners within a single interactional occasion. Second, in the teacher-student interactions, more factors were involved, and in a more complicated way. Excerpt (3) below indicates how the teacher-student interactions, within which the two slang terms were used, occurred.

Figure 1. The Intermediate-level EFL learners' learning and use of English slang in relation to identity development in student-student dyadic interactions

Excerpt 3: Teacher-student interactions

T:		Today, we are learning expressions you can use when you are hungry.
Ss:		(making noises)
T:		Now, let's exercise the expressions.
Ss:		(continuously making noises)
T:		When you eat what you like, what do you say in English?
S4:		(raising his hand) Wicked!
T:		(shaking her head) No, I need a different answer.
S4:		It has the same meaning.
T:		(shaking her head) But, it's slang. I told you what slang is, right?
S4:		(in low but audible voice) S***!
T:		(with face reddened) *Jigeum, mueorago haesseoyo?* (What did you say?)*
S4:		(mumbling) I think "Wicked!" is good. *Seonsaengnimdo geureotge saenggaghaji aneuseyo?* (Aren't you of the same opinion?)
T:		(face still reddened) *Swineun sigane jeohante oseyo.* (I want to have a word with you during the recess.)
S4:		(surprised) *Waeyo?* (Why, ma'am?)
T:		*Iyu molayo?* (You don't know why?) *Seonsaengnimege geureon daneo sseulseuit-nayo?* (You should not use such a word to your teacher.)
S4:		(remorsefully) I'm sorry, ma'am.

* The bracketed English sentences preceded by the italicised Korean sentences represent the researcher's translation of the Korean sentences.

In Excerpt 3, the most noticeable is S4's use of a taboo slang word. Such use seems to reflect that EFL learner empowerment resulting from learner identity could reduce the across-proficiency-level awareness of the restrictedness of English slang use in the classroom context. The bi-directionality of the relationship between empowerment and identity, suggested in Cummins (2001), was found in this study to influence the two processes in a way that is less than mutually strengthening. S4 used the taboo slang word because he was empowered by his EFL identity, which related to his understanding of his relationship to the teacher from a different perspective; he and the teacher as co-participants in a form of discourse community of English slang. One of Norton's three definitions of identity, "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world" (2000: 5), appears to match S4's identity development. In his journal, he entered that his use of *s**** was prompted by what he perceived as the teacher's failure to support the high-level learners, including him, who supposedly perceived themselves to know the English non-taboo slang word *wicked* as well as he perceived her to**.** S4's journal entry demonstrated that he seemed to view the teacher

as someone of standing equal to him in terms of English slang knowledge. S4 implied that this view prompted his use of the taboo word. These findings seem to parallel those of Charkova which suggested that taboo slang words are directed at a *peer*, who S4 perceived his EFL teacher to be in relation to the understanding of English.

S4's empowerment did not contribute to increasing his identity in turn. The teacher's strong objection to his implicit attempt to group her as a co-member of the community of knowledge of English slang and to challenge her teacher authority led to the reconstruction of his identity. Sade (2011) claimed that as an identity emerges, it causes the other identities to be reconstructed. The finding of this study appears to indicate that the same identity could also undergo reconstruction. S4 had to reconstruct his understanding of his relationship to the teacher. The teacher stressed that S4's use of the taboo word, which she viewed as a *swearword* (Moore, 2012), had the potential of harming his own EFL learning, as shown in the interview excerpt below.

Excerpt 4: Teacher's report

Having been an EFL learner myself, I could identify with S4 when he assertively sought agreement with me on *wicked*. When learning English, I also found myself increasingly viewing English teachers as those with whom I could deal more easily than teachers of other subjects. You see, we had much more classroom discipline back then. However, in class, students should respect their teacher's authority in certain aspects and do things accordingly. Otherwise, classroom teaching/learning could hardly occur. The use of English slang, I believe, is something not to be allowed. Elementary students should first learn words/expressions in the textbooks. English slang is not something EFL learners are expected to use. I am worried that some CLT advocates mistake English slang for a component of CLT. You can and should use good, formal English words/expressions for communicative purposes. The use of the taboo word is absolutely unacceptable. S4 might have been influenced by what I have said, but he should not have used it. I hope that no student will. Once you overstep the boundaries, you begin to see your teacher as someone you can use taboo words to and lose your respect for. This will definitely jeopardise your learning because you are not likely to undergo the (difficult) process of learning under the guidance of someone that you do not respect.

In Excerpt 4, it appears that despite her appreciation of the construction of EFL learner identity and empowerment, the teacher believes - most importantly – that her authority as an EFL teacher should not be undermined in areas, including the non-use of English slang, to achieve her pedagogical goal. Nayar (1997) asserted that native-like cultural competence does not represent a high priority in EFL classrooms and that attempts for such prioritization would jeopardise EFL learners' ethnic identities. Further, Janicki (1985) noted that non-native speakers' linguistic behaviour such as the use of slang and obscenities could likely result in social consequences as it could violate sociolinguistic rules, established by some norms, that allow only native speakers to use slang/obscenities. Janicki observed the presence of a set of heretofore unidentified norms prohibiting non-native speakers from using some forms.

Regarding these norms, it seems that the teacher under study formulated certain frameworks concerning the use of English slang in her classroom context. She instituted a practice of interpretation of Korean EFL learner identity through which learners were required to honour her authority and to behave in alignment with her demands, as reported earlier. The teacher determined the level of EFL learner empowerment acceptable in the classroom; and because of this, the students were not expected/allowed to use English slang. The teacher perceived the students' non-use of English slang as indispensable in enabling her to sufficiently cover the textbook content within the time constraints of class periods.

Additionally, the teacher's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) was found to influence EFL learner identity relating to English slang use. Shulman (1987) claimed that PCK mainly develops via efforts to reduce the differences between theory and practice. The teacher under study became sensitised to the perceived misinterpretation of CLT: that English slang is a component of CLT. Her view of CLT as not involving the teaching of English slang derived from her practice-based belief which appears to conflict with Canale and Swain (1980). Canale and Swain included slang ability in the construct of sociolinguistic competence, one of their four dimensions of communicative competence. Richards (2006) suggested that the goal of CLT is to improve language learners' communicative competence.

The teacher's eschewal of the teaching of slang paralleled the espousal of the teaching of the received vocabulary. Interestingly, the teacher's preference for Standard English seems to partly correspond to NESs' endeavours to designate "anything that isn't 'standard' as 'dialect' if lucky and 'slang' if not" (McArthur 1998: 200) in an effort to safeguard Standard English. What is involved in such micro- and macro-discourse on Standard English is an attempt to reinforce authority (Milroy and Milroy, 1991). Bourdieu (1991) contended that discourses also represent symbols of authority, fated to be trusted and obeyed. The focus of the teacher in the current study on her students' obedience to her authority, repeatedly foregrounded, appears to indicate that it was the locus of motivation for her reconstructive efforts toward EFL learner identity. These factors, arising from the teacher's pedagogical perceptions, contributed to the lower incidence of English slang use in the teacher-student interactions: the students had to pay more attention to the teacher's disapproval of English slang use than when in the student-student interactions. The students confirmed (in the post-observation interviews) these differences in their attention to the teacher's disapproval.

The high-level student's use of a taboo word, observed in Excerpt 3, triggered a negative reaction from the intermediate- and low-level students. The following is an excerpt of what a low-level student entered in his journal.
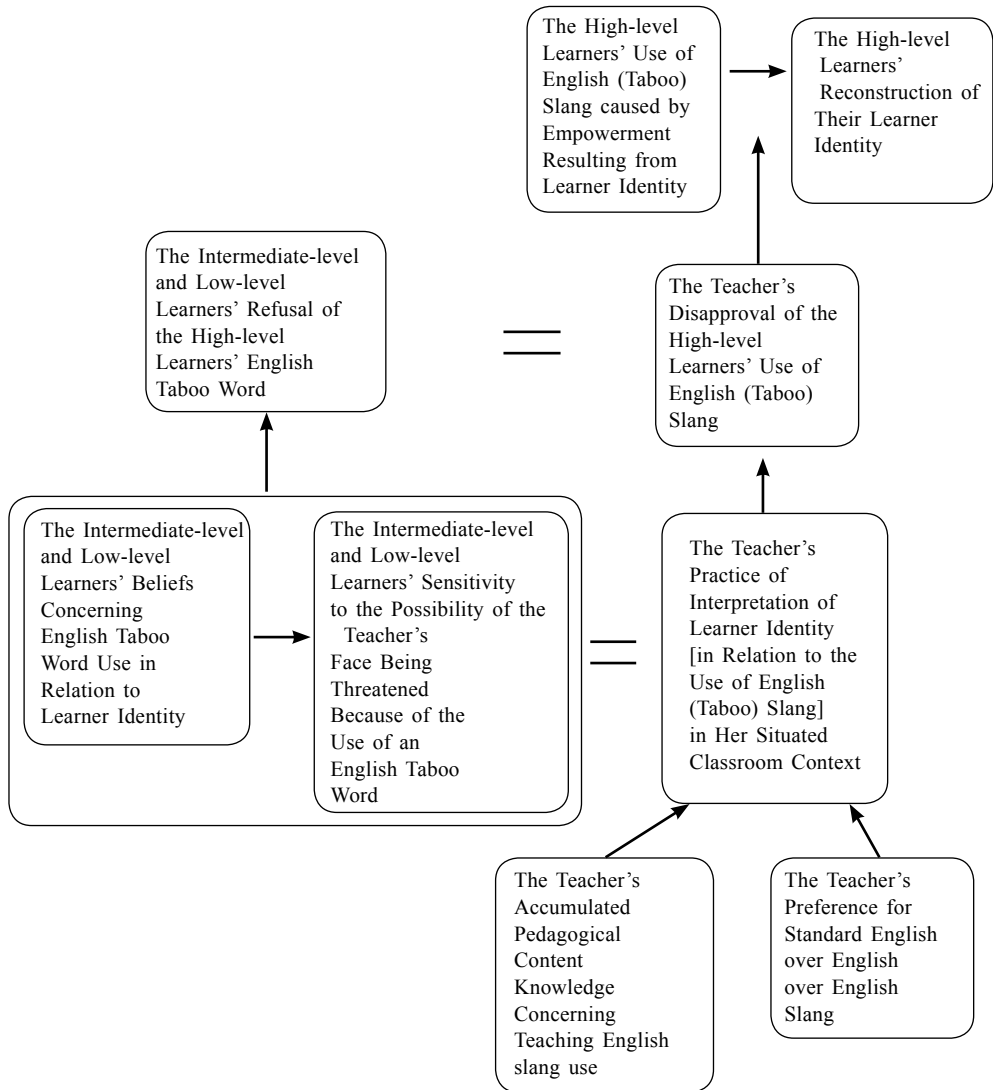
Excerpt 5: A low-level student's journal entry

Today, in English class, a kid good at English said 'S***!' to the teacher. The teacher has been kind to us. And even in cases where a teacher has been unkind, saying 'S***!' to her is totally wrong. You can't say that to your teacher in Korean, so you can't say that to her in English. She will be mad.

The correspondence between student and teacher beliefs about the use of the English

taboo word and that between their views on the relevant EFL learner identity, as shown when examining the journal entry excerpt above and the teacher's interview excerpt earlier, seem to be predicated on their agreement on the attributes of language learner identity [i.e., its being context-dependent and socially mediated (Murray, 2011)]. Although the use of a taboo word as observed in this study has not been explicitly listed as an example, it appears that it could be more appropriately classified as expressive speech acts which involve the utterances through which emotions and attitudes towards something are expressed (Searle, 1979). Regarding the use of a taboo word as a speech act, it could operate as a face threat-ening act (FTA), as suggested in Excerpt 5. FTA refers to a speech act which could threaten the face of a speaker or hearer (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). The notion of face has been defined as "every individual's feeling of self-worth" (Thomas 1995: 169). What is noteworthy in the present study is that the possibility of the teacher's face being threatened, which the high-level students did not consider, was noticed by the intermediate- and low-level students. Niezgoda and Röver (2001) found that low-level Czech EFL learners viewed pragmatic errors as more grave than grammatical ones. Concerning this finding, it seems interesting that the intermediate- and low-level students in this study constructed EFL learner identity and understood their relationship to the world (Norton, 2000) in a way that sensitised them to a form of contextually situated EFL pragmatic limitation transferred from L1. Further, the differences, depending on proficiency level, in views of the teacher-student relationships appear to have produced the differences in sensitivity to the use of the English taboo word. Brown and Levinson (1987) asserted that the power relationships between the speaker and hearer affect potential threats to face. In relation to this assertion, the intermediate- and low-level students' lack of support for the equality-based teacher-student relationships seems to have resulted in the differences. Figure 2 indicates how English slang use in relation to EFL learner identity development was addressed in the teacher-student dyadic interactions.

Figure 2. The high-level EFL learners' use of English slang in relation to identity development in teacher-student dyadic interactions

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated Korean elementary school EFL learners' use and learning of English slang in relation to their identity development. The results indicated that the occurrence of English slang use was overall infrequent. Further, the intermediate-level learners

used more slang than the high-level and low-level learners, and slang was used more in the student-student interactions than in the teacher-student interactions.

Many factors were found to be involved in complex ways in the processes of English slang use and learning. In the student-student interactions, the intermediate-level learners pursued the interpersonal functions of language (Halliday, 1994), which are applied to "establish and maintain social relationships" (Brown and Yule, 1983: 3), in the form of seeking acceptance and respect through their efforts to use and learn English slang. In these processes, the intermediate-level learners' identity was developed in a way that interacted with motivation to strengthen their English abilities in general. In the teacher-student interactions, a high-level learner's identity reconstruction and the consequent non-use of English taboo words because of the teacher's situated redefinition of the trajectory of EFL learner identity was noteworthy. Further, the high-level learners' empowerment, occasioned by their initially constructed identity, encountered disapproval from the intermediate- and low-level learners; and these two groups of learners were concerned about the teacher's potential loss of face arising from his use of an English taboo word.

In terms of pedagogical implications, it seems appropriate to consider a premise: the subliminally negative effects of English slang use and learning suggested in Charkova (2007). Regarding this, attention could be directed to licensing/encouraging EFL teachers to address the issue of English slang in the classroom from pedagogical perspectives. This is in line with Cook's (2001) idea of licensing language teachers' use of L1 under appropriate conditions. Although the teacher under study strongly opposed the use of English slang, her students generally had receptive attitudes towards English slang. Without well-informed and contextualised *guidance* from their teachers, it seems that EFL learners could hardly discern ways to constructively leverage their enthusiasm for English slang to improve their general English abilities. This guidance could help EFL learners, who utilise their interest in English slang to enhance their English proficiency, "personalise their learning, to engage directly in the learning process, to experiment, to reflect on their experiences, and to seek the support" (Murray, 2011: 85).

With respect to such teacher involvement, it appears that EFL teacher training programs could profitably highlight the importance of the "dialectical relation between theory and practice" (Tsui, 2012: 34). Considering this, the teacher education participants should be enabled to theorise their practice (Hüttner *et al.*, 2012) in relation to dealing with their students' use and learning of English slang in the classroom. Such theorisation and the consequent increased experiential knowledge could facilitate the consolidation of the knowledge base for providing the EFL students the well-informed and contextualised guidance (discussed above). This relationship between theorisation and experiential knowledge appears to be potentially beneficial also because language teachers' experiential knowledge serves as a motivating force (Bailey, 2006).

This study is admittedly open to criticism and improvement in many aspects, including the limited number of participants. Concerning the limitation, a suggestion could be proposed for future research: the conduct of large-scale surveys to investigate how and why elementary EFL learner's use and learn English slang in relation to identity construction. They would provide more comprehensive diagnoses of elementary EFL learners' use and learning of English slang and of how their identities are (re)constructed through the use and learning of the slang. Additionally, they would enhance our understanding of which factors influence the EFL learner' use and learning of English slang and in what ways.

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