

# An Asian Graduate Teaching Assistant Teaching Freshman English Composition at a U.S. University

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## Introduction

In an era of World Englishes and the spread of English internationally, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), the largest international organization of English teachers, recognizes that nonnative English scholars have become visible and made a large contribution to theoretical and pedagogical aspects of teaching English. At the same time, numerous applied linguists and second language acquisition researchers have explored the native and nonnative distinction and seem to agree that the distinction is complicated and not clear-cut, comprised of a number of variables, including proficiency in English, social identity, birth place, and the length of stay in the target language community (e.g., Braine, 2010; Davies, 2003; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Liu, 2006).

While the roles nonnative English teachers play have been acknowledged in TESOL, it is apparent that a growing number of nonnative English teachers teach freshman English composition to native English speaking and ESL students at universities in North America. Even though an increasing amount of research has focused on the learning aspects of freshman English composition (Reid, 1993; Silva, 1993), little research seems to touch on the issues of nonnative English teachers teaching these courses.

According to Canagarajah (1999), nonnative English teachers account for more

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than 80 percent of English teachers worldwide. In fact, nonnative English teachers are well accepted in English as Foreign Language (EFL) settings, including Japan, Korea, and China. Medgyes (1994), for instance, insists that nonnative English teachers have unique strengths in teaching English and can (1) provide a good learner model for imitation, (2) teach language learning strategies more effectively, (3) supply learners with more information about the English language, (4) anticipate and prevent language difficulties better, (5) be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners, and (6) make use of the learners' mother tongue.

However, these positive attributes of nonnative English teachers might not work when it comes to teaching English to native English speaking and ESL students in English speaking countries, who mainly expect to be taught by native English speaking teachers. Thomas (1999), for example, admits that nonnative English teachers have to work harder than native English speaking teachers to establish credibility as language teaching professionals. A greater challenge might await if nonnative English teachers are in a position of international graduate assistant teachers (GATs) who might not have an adequate amount of teaching experience in English speaking countries. A few studies have explored the miscommunication issues of international GATs that stem from linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, and ideological complexities (Plakans, 1997; Williams, 1992).

Ethnographic case studies, such as narrative studies and classroom observations, may be one of the best ways to understand the issues concerning international GATs who are teaching freshman English composition. Braine (2010) points out that the narratives of nonnative English teachers that reveal their socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of education and training should be explored by researchers because such narrative studies can add depth to the research base of English language teaching. He also suggests such narrative studies would provide essential data for future curriculum design and teacher education. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the publication of these narratives empowers these often marginalized teachers by giving them a "voice" and encouraging them to view events from their own perspectives. In addition, Belcher and Connor (2001) point out that narratives can provide windows on learners' metalinguistic awareness, capable of telling us much about their conscious use of language-learning strategies.

In order to further understand the issues of international GATs, this ethnographic case study focuses on a female international GAT from South Korea and seeks to answer the following research questions.

Research question: What is revealed through her educational history?

What are her pedagogy, practice, and teaching philosophy as a non-native English teacher?

## Methods

The main source of the data for the study was collected through iterative face to face interviews, using the three-step in-depth interviewing method developed by Seidman (1998). The first interview explored the interviewee's experience from the past to the present (focused life history). The second interview reconstructed the details of the interviewee's current experience (the details of experience). The third interview explored the meaning of the participant's experience (reflection on meaning) (see Appendix A). I reviewed the transcripts of the interviewee's in-depth interviews several times and marked those passages that stood out as interesting and important regarding the interviewee's experiences in learning and teaching English. The interview data were then classified according to the following themes: the interviewee's educational history, the interviewee's pedagogy and practice as a nonnative English teacher, and the interviewee's teaching philosophy as a nonnative English teacher. Classroom observations were also made in order to support the interview data.

This study attempted to craft a characterization of the research participant both diachronically, as connected to her own educational history, and synchronically, as her current teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices. The participant characterization emerged from both the phenomenological in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The following is the information about the research participant.

PARTICIPANT	BIRTH PLACE	FIRST LANGUAGE	OTHER LANGUAGES LEARNED OR SPOKEN	AGE OF ARRIVAL IN U.S.	FIRST EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH	CONTEXT OF FIRST EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH
Ms. K	South Korea	Korean	Japanese, German	31	Junior high school	EFL

Ms. K grew up in South Korea. Upon graduation from a university with a BA degree in Education, she enrolled in the English program at a Korean branch of a U.S. university and obtained her second BA in English Literature. She then taught English at a private school and tutored high school students for eight years in her country.

After teaching in South Korea, she went to the U.S. and enrolled in an ESL MA program while teaching freshman English composition to American and ESL students. Ms. K started teaching freshman English composition in fall 2002. She was 32 years old at the time of the study.

## Findings and Discussion

### 1. Ms. K's Educational History

I conducted iterative interviews with Ms. K mainly during the spring semester 2003. She was entering into her second semester as a nonnative English teacher during the interview period. Ms. K was born and raised in South Korea. She started learning English at the age of 13 (7<sup>th</sup> grade) in an English as a foreign language context. She studied English until she graduated from high school. Then she entered Ewha Woman's University, one of the most prestigious in South Korea, and majored in Education. Even Dr. T, director of the ESL MA program at the Western University, had heard of Ewha. In the second interview, Ms. K said:

"I looked at mine (her personal profile) and he (Dr. T) wrote down that I graduated from prestigious Ewha and I laughed a lot." (Ms. K, second interview, March 24, 2003)

This shows that the highly intelligent Ms. K is a survivor of competitive entrance examinations in an Asian country. Even though she was interested in English as an undergraduate, she only took a few required English classes because her focus was on her major, Education. After graduation, however, she started teaching English to middle and high school students at a private school, mainly teaching English grammar and English essay writing to high school students. At that time, she always felt frustrated because she knew her English proficiency was not perfect. After three years of teaching English, Ms. K decided to quit and to go to Canada to study English further. She took some ESL classes at a university there, which unfortunately did not satisfy her strong desire to master English. Thus, Ms. K gave up studying English in Canada after one semester, and went back to South Korea.

There Ms. K began to live with her sister's family because her sister was married to an American working for the U.S. military, giving Ms. K a continuing chance to communicate daily with a native speaker of English. Ms. K recalls:

“I had a lot of chances to talk to my American brother in law, and he was very talkative. We would talk for a few hours for many hours. Well, while I listened to him, I learned lots of vocabulary and expressions, and I had to listen to him for many hours, and that also improved my listening skill a lot, and after that I could pick up more words from his speech···that was very useful.” (Ms. K, second interview, March 24, 2003)

Her eagerness to learn English lasted back in her country, with the good luck in having an American relative there. At the same time, Ms. K was able to enroll in some classes, such as English composition and technical English writing, at a South Korea branch of the University of Maryland that was originally intended for educating the U.S. military people and their relatives working in South Korea. Thus, she was able to receive instruction in English from native speakers of English at an American university located in Seoul in South Korea. While studying there, she was tutoring Korean high school students in English essay writing. Finally she obtained a second BA in English from the University of Maryland, Seoul. Ms. K believes her University of Maryland experience was later reflected in her teaching of freshman English composition at a U.S. University.

“Of course, I’m using my experience about how to write an essay, I already took English 101 and 102, and I learned how to write an essay and how to analyze an essay rhetorically, those kind of things, I can understand those concepts easily because I already learned that, but I still have to read books and prepare for my class. So I would say my experience just helps me understand what I have to teach.” (Ms. K, second interview, March 24, 2003)

Ms. K believes her experience in taking English composition classes at the University of Maryland in South Korea helps her to understand rhetorical structures of English academic writing that are different from those of Korean academic writing.

Ms. K knew herself to be a talented language learner. She felt comfortable in learning languages, and liked to memorize new vocabulary and grammar so that she could express herself better. Ms. K really appreciated her parents because they were very supportive of her education.

“Yes, my father supported me to go to college. Actually he wanted his children

to be educated, to finish college and get a good job. So my parents were pretty much supportive.” (Ms. K, first interview, February 14, 2003)

Ms. K was given rich educational opportunities because her parents had been enthusiastic about her education. Ms. K had especially been interested in learning foreign languages. She had always had a strong desire not only to study but to teach English. In order to fulfill the desire, she decided to go to the United States and enrolled in classes in an ESL MA program at a U.S. University. Here she taught freshman English composition but, this time to American and ESL students as an international teaching assistant. Ms. K considered teaching English composition to be fun as well as useful for her future career.

“The main purpose of my study, of my stay in the U.S. is to study to get my degree... but the reason I wanted to get this position, teaching assistantship was to have fun experience in teaching college students so that I can build my career on this and then stay in this field.” (Ms. K, first interview, February 14, 2003)

Ms. K’s journey of learning and teaching English continued because she has a clear purpose to become a professional language specialist with her strong desire to learn and teach English language.

## **2. Ms. K’s Pedagogy and Practice as a Nonnative English Teacher**

Ms. K observed some English composition classes taught by native and nonnative English teachers and acknowledged the difference in students’ responses to native and nonnative teachers.

“Classroom atmosphere was a little different I would say, the American male teacher was lecturing with a movie, then I feel different response from students to international students (international graduate assistant teachers), it’s the same in my class too. They don’t respect as much, I am not sure if respect is the right word, but anyway, from the beginning as soon as they listen to the teacher’s accent, they feel a little frustrated I would say, I’m not sure if that’s a correct adjective, but something like that, frustrated and they don’t try harder to understand the teacher, instead they just give up on understanding the

teacher and try to use the excuse to go on easy with the class...” (Ms. K, third interview, March 31, 2003)

“I feel a little different atmosphere in a native teacher classroom and nonnative teacher classroom, the American students respond differently when they hear fluent English... they don't complain at all, but when they listen to international students speak, even some patient students give up trying to understand the person, that's what happened among the students, some of them try to understand the accent better, but not all the students, they just feel frustrated I guess.” (Ms. K, third interview, March 31, 2003)

Ms. K's observations showed that American students tend not to accept nonnative teachers' accents, which eventually led to disrespect of the teachers themselves, even though their English writing skills and knowledge of English language were excellent. Ms. K herself experienced this negative response from her students. Ms. K grasped her biggest weakness as a nonnative teacher through her teaching practice.

“but as a nonnative teacher, sometimes language problem causes problems in teaching, sometimes I cannot express my idea fluently, and then sometimes they don't understand my language, what I am saying, and sometimes even though I say correct English they don't understand my accent, and as a result they don't understand my point that sometimes would happen I would say, and you know some impatient students would not try to understand the teacher completely, you know, some native speakers avoid nonnative speakers because they feel tired when they talk to non-natives, I think that would sometimes happen in my class too...” (Ms. K, third interview, March 31, 2003)

“When I cannot express myself in English fluently, I feel frustrated and I know I am a nonnative teacher, yeah.” (Ms. K, second interview, March 24, 2003)

“I admit there is a problem about international GATs, it's not convenient for students to learn from international GATs, because of the language problem, and language problem also entails class room preparation too, because to prepare the classes, you have to read a lot of materials, but reading the materials in English is not easy for international GATs, and they also have

limited time like native speakers, so they may have difficulties preparing the classes sometimes” (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

Ms. K admitted that communication with her students was a problem, because her spoken English sometimes did not allow her to express things clearly and her students tended not to respect her foreign accent. However, Ms. K believed that she could overcome this communication problem as long as she provided good content and information on writing to her students. Thus, for Ms. K to grow in teaching English composition as a nonnative teacher, providing her students with necessary skills and information on essay writing seemed to be indispensable for her teaching.

“I just try to accommodate my students, and then try to give them necessary things, I mean, give them what they need for their study. That’s my goal this semester.” (Ms. K, second interview, March 24, 2003)

“I just keep a certain distance, ask them necessary things and give them necessary things like that.” (Ms. K, third interview, March 31, 2003)

“I admit that international GATs have shortcomings…the problem is not that serious, as long as instructors are well prepared, because this course is about writing an essay as I told you earlier.” (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

In addition, since Ms. K was good at writing English essays, she felt confident in teaching English composition.

“I don’t mind teaching this English composition class much, because it’s not about teaching how to speak English, I can accept this position, because it’s about teaching how to write an essay, which I do all the time, and I think I can teach that, because usually my essays are good (laughing), I mean, I get a good grade on my essays, and I think how to write an essay, how to write a good essay, so that’s why I am doing this.” (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

At the same time, Ms. K strongly believed that good preparation was indispensable



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because she wanted to give her students the necessary knowledge of academic English writing in class. In sum, the content of every classroom practice was important for Ms. K to overcome her weakness as a nonnative English teacher.

In addition to the interviews conducted in spring 2003, I observed Ms. K's classes during the fall 2003. By this time, Ms. K had entered into her third semester teaching freshman English composition. Ms. K seemed to have adapted well to communication with her American students. From one of classes, I took the following notes.

"The interaction between the teacher and the students went smoothly. After class, I asked the teacher if she still had communication problems with her students. She said yes and told me that she was sometimes not able to understand her students when they spoke too fast. But from today's observation, the teacher answered each student's question clearly and did not seem to have communication problems with her students. I said to the teacher, "You have overcome a communication problem." She replied, "Thank you," with a smile on her face." (Field notes, September 29, 2003, English 102 for native-speaking English students)

At least from my weekly classroom observations, Ms. K no longer seemed to have a serious communication problem with her students. The following words from an interview of this period showed that Ms. K had found a way to circumvent communication problems through her teaching methods.

"Sometimes I have to ask several times to understand my students, but, uh, because I ask several times, I don't miss many things I think." (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

Ms. K seemed to have adapted to classroom interaction at a U.S. university and learned some interactive skills to ask her students with good timing in class in order not to miss questions from her students. Furthermore, some other interesting interactions took place between Ms. K and her American students. I took the following observation notes.

"During the peer review, the teacher showed Polis (Curse Home-site) on the screen. Her name was on the course home-site. A male student asked her

whether she had a middle name or not. She replied, "Koreans don't have middle names." Another male student said to Ms. K, "You don't have middle names?" Another male student, who was a good participant in class, said, "Isabella." The student kindly created a middle name for the teacher and some students burst into laughter. An interesting and joyful interaction took place here." (Field notes, October 20, 2003, English 102 for native-speaking English students)

Most students knew that Ms. K came from South Korea, but were surprised to know that Koreans do not have middle names. In response to this fact, in a playful atmosphere, a male student created the middle name "Isabella" for her. While this playful communication took place in class, she was able to maintain discipline in her teaching. I made this comment in my field notes.

"The teacher effectively showed information (Course Home-site) on the classroom schedule, sources, etc. by using the computer projector in class. Ms. K was able to understand and answer each student's question quickly and sincerely. I sensed her sincere and serious attitude toward each question from the students." (Field notes, October 20, 2003, English 102 for native-speaking English students)

With her effective use of the computer projector in class, Ms. K always explained important information clearly to her students and communicated with them with her robust and sincere attitude.

"The teacher read the assignment projected on the screen with the use of an arrow. The students concentrated well on the screen. The teacher kept talking like, "Include examples... two presentations... questions?" A male student asked about the next assignment, "How we change as a writer..." and the student kept asking. The teacher answered the question. Then some students asked questions. The teacher answered each question without any miscommunication." (Field notes, November 3, 2003, English 102 for native-speaking English students)

This excerpt also presents Ms. K's pedagogy and practice, which focused on good content by providing her students with necessary information, such as providing clear

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schedules of assignments and clear instruction on how to write academically, through verbal explanations supported by the computer.

By her third semester, Ms. K seemed to be enjoying conferences with her students. I took the following classroom observation notes.

“Then Ms. K began to talk about conferences, and said to the students “Who’s coming on Wednesday?” Many students raised their hands. The teacher set up a time for each student, for example, like, “Jessie, 2:30,” “Rodriguez, 2:45.” ...She seems to like conferences because she felt the students’ positive attitudes in the conferences. Lots of students raised their hands in response to the teacher’s scheduling of the conference time.” (Field notes, November 17, 2003, English 102 for native-speaking English students)

Ms. K confirmed my classroom observation notes and talked about conferences in an interview.

“Oh, best moment, I enjoyed conferences with my students, I met my students one-to-one, and went over their arguments, the whole essay, and evaluated the supports and theses, and I found pretty many faults in their writing, some of them were not focused, or some of them were not coherent or logical, and we fixed those things together and I think that helped a lot with their essays, and they also said that helped with their papers, so I felt good about that... because my strength was teaching organization, I am not good at teaching my students new vocabulary or new expressions, but I could see their fallacies in their writing, in their organizations in their essays, and I could correct them.” (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

Thus, in her third semester, Ms. K found a place to use her strengths; teaching the importance of organization, through one-on-one conferences, which also supplied good content by giving students more necessary information on English essay writing. At the same time, Ms. K’s pedagogy and practice were continuing to grow with her accumulated experiences in teaching English composition.

### 3. Ms. K’s Teaching Philosophy as a Nonnative English Teacher

With cultural diversity on campus, one of the strengths of U.S. universities, Ms.

K believes that nonnative English teachers (international graduate assistant teachers: GATs) also reinforce cultural diversity. In fall 2003, an article written by an American student in the campus newspaper evoked a serious response from nonnative English teachers because it complained about their “communication problems” and suggested that the university stop hiring international graduate assistants to teach freshman English composition. Ms. K responded to this article as follows.

“I kept, I was still thinking about the article, the position of international GATs, and one day I was coming to school, and I was standing in front of the modern language student union, I saw a lot of international people, the campus was full of international people, and a lot of different people with different cultures, and I was excited about it, and I thought, diversity was also very important at a university, and so I thought we shouldn’t give up that diversity, and I thought nobody would want to see only English speakers on this campus with only one culture, that would be so boring...to be creative, you know, you have to keep diversity...diversity was necessary on campus, and to keep that diversity, it’s necessary to keep international GATs... hiring international GATs is also about improving diversity... it could be a little bit inconvenient to have international GATs in classrooms, but... that’s the cost to have diversity, and you know, diversity eventually will benefit the students also, that was my conclusion.” (Ms. K, fourth interview, December 8, 2003)

Ms. K believed that nonnative English teachers (international GATs) play an important role in maintaining cultural diversity on campus, and that their presence benefits students. Recognizing that nonnative English teachers may experience “communication problems,” Ms. K believed that she was qualified to teach English composition as long as she was well prepared and maintained robust content in her classroom practice by using her own strengths. In addition, Ms. K’s teaching was always growing, exemplified by increased comfort in one-on-one conferences with her students.

## Conclusion

The educational history of Ms. K reveals her rich educational background accumulated in her home country. After taking several ESL classes in Canada, Ms. K obtained her second bachelor’s degree in English literature at a Seoul campus of a U.S.

university. Ms. K also seized an opportunity to learn communicative English from her brother in law who was an American working for the U.S. military in South Korea. Ms. K's parents were enthusiastic about her education. The strong desire to learn English language and to build a career as a professional allowed her to proceed to a U.S. graduate school while teaching freshman English composition to American and ESL students.

Through her pedagogy and practice in teaching English composition as a non-native English teacher, Ms. K admitted communication problems, because her spoken English sometimes did not allow her to express things clearly and her students tended not to respect her foreign accent. However, in order to gain credibility as an English teacher, Ms. K needed to spend an enormous amount of time preparing for classes to provide her students with necessary knowledge, skills, and information about English composition. Classroom observations demonstrated that Ms. K constructed robust content in class by providing clear schedules of assignments and clear instruction on academic writing through the effective use of verbal explanations and projected computer aid. At the same time, the growing skills of teaching practice was obvious, such as Ms. K's holding one-on-one conferences with her students, which was her favorite part of teaching and a good opportunity to show her strengths as an academic writing instructor.

In terms of teaching philosophy, though Ms. K admitted communication problems, she believed that nonnative English teachers play an important role in maintaining cultural diversity on campus. Thomas (1999), for example, insists that "we need to value diversity and to acknowledge the presence of the nonnative English speaking professional, as an important, vital, and very credible source force in the TESOL profession (p. 12). In addition, Kubota (2002) suggests that advocating diversity can provide our students with precious opportunities to understand and negotiate differences. Thus, Ms. K's awareness of cultural diversity and robust teaching practice seem essential to her identity construction as a nonnative English teacher. It goes without saying that such nonnative English teachers should be supported by their colleagues and administrators in order to maintain diversity on U.S. campuses and to enrich a U.S. education. Further narrative studies are needed to provide the in-depth research base of English language teaching in an era of the global spread of English.

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## Appendix A

### A. Interview questions for the first interview

1. Could you tell me about your previous language learning experiences in school and at home?
2. Could you tell me about your educational background?
3. Could you tell me about your past teaching experience?
4. Could you describe your teaching experiences working with your students in English composition?
5. How would you define nonnative English speakers and native English speakers?
6. What challenges have you experienced in teaching English composition as a nonnative English speaker?
7. What is your primary motive for your decision to teach in the U.S. context?

### B. Interview questions for the second interview

1. How is your language learning experience reflected in your teaching practice?
2. What are your best and worst moments in teaching English composition?
3. What works really well with your students in class? Why? How do you know?
4. How is your past teaching experience reflected in your current teaching practice?
5. What, to you, makes a nonnative speaking teacher unique?
6. Have you been taught how to establish your credibility?
7. What conflicts and challenges do you have in teaching English composition?

### C. Interview questions for the third interview

1. What is the meaning you give to teaching English composition as a nonnative English teacher?
2. How do you view your role as a nonnative English teacher?
3. What are you basing your perceptions of advantages/disadvantages on?
4. How are your multilingual/multicultural strengths reflected in your teaching?
5. What qualities should nonnative English teachers have in the U.S. educational context?