Preservice Teachers' Envisioning of ELT in the Post-Pandemic Era: An Exploratory Study of Korean EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers' accountability has arisen to swiftly respond to changes in teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19. Many researchers and educators have responded to the inquiry for envisioning teacher education during the pandemic; however, there is a dearth of research on preservice teachers' envisioning of English language teaching (ELT). Drawing upon the sociocultural perspectives of teachers and teaching, therefore, this qualitative study provided a glimpse of EFL preservice teachers' envisioning of ELT through their perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. Thirty-five EFL preservice teachers in South Korea participated in this study. Data included interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and argumentative essays written by the participants. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The study revealed three major findings. First, the participants perceived and envisioned ELT with emphasis on human interactions, task-based teaching, individualization, and technology use. Second, the participants indicated that teachers should play a major role to ensure effective language teaching. Third, the participants stated that preservice teachers need to be well-prepared in teacher education for the post-COVID-19 era. These findings suggest that teacher education should consider the needs and prospects of preservice teachers in the uncertain circumstances of the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: EFL preservice teachers, the envisioning of ELT, teacher education, sociocultural perspectives, the post-pandemic era

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented and unexpected economic and social disruption worldwide since 2020. There were 130 country-wide closures that affected 70% of the world's student population and approximately a hundred million learners as of February 2021 (UNESCO, 2021). This caused a significant paradigm shift in instructional delivery mode

from face-to-face to online or virtual learning environments. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns caused disturbances in many aspects of language learning and teaching (Richards, 2020). Educators, teachers, professionals, and researchers have investigated the challenges and newness of the COVID-19 era that teachers and students faced (Ferdig et al., 2020; Hartshorne & Baumgartner, 2020), which deepened our understanding of both teachers' and students' perceptions and reflections on teaching and learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, little is known about preservice teachers' stories, which is crucial for (re)envisioning teacher education in TESOL.

As such, envisioning English language teaching (ELT) in the post-pandemic era is crucial. In particular, preservice teachers will engage in the development and implementation of ELT in the post-pandemic era. However, there is lacking information about preservice teachers' future envisioning, readiness, and expertise of ELT. Therefore, this study examined how EFL preservice teachers in Korea envision ELT to provide the background for a larger scale study of pre- and in-service teachers' future enactment of these envisioned ideas. Three research questions guided our study:

1. How did EFL preservice teachers perceive ELT in the post-pandemic era?

2. How did EFL preservice teachers envision the role of English language teachers in the post-pandmic era?

3. What did EFL preservice teachers perceive as necessary for TESOL teacher education in the post-pandemic era?

Sociocultural Perspectives of Teaching and Teachers

Learning to teach is influenced by teachers' experiences and reflections on their teaching. Teaching and learning are vigorous social activities situated in social and physical contexts (Johnson, 2012; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theories argue that social activities people engage in must be explored in order to understand human learning and high cognitive development as individual's mental activities (Johnson, 2012; Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). Teaching and learning are progressive movements and socially situated activities of inner selves and outer objects (Johnson, 2012). Therefore, it is needed to view teaching and learning in social constructivism.

From a sociocultural point of view, pre- and in-service teachers are agentive beings. Agency refers to an individual capacity to act contingent on the quality of individuals' engagement with their surroundings or operate autonomously of determining constraints of social structure (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Martin (2004) maintains that agency "emerges developmentally as properties of psychological persons" (p. 137), which indicates that individuals play a focal role in determining agency within social contexts. Therefore, agency is the capability to plan, implement, and evaluate goal attainment (Brown, 2014). Teachers can operate agency through the implementation of particular instructional practices (Martin, 2004). Thus, people achieve agency through thoughts and actions rather than acquiring it automatically. Although agency has been extensively theorized across various fields or areas, teacher agency has received little attention (Priestley et al., 2015; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007), including vague conceptualization (Pyhältö et al., 2012) and insufficient understanding of the mediating role of agency in education (Brown, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to foster a better understanding of teacher agency along with sociocultural perspectives due to its complexity and dynamics.

Preservice Teachers' Experiences and Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic

Several studies (Flores & Swennen, 2020; Roman, 2020) called for research focusing on informing curricular decisions of teacher educators and institutional stakeholders in order to prepare preservice teachers for the post-pandemic era. However, few studies (Karimi, Fakhri Alamdari, & Ahmadian, 2021; Kim, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Syafryadin et al., 2021) focused on preservice teachers' perceptions and reflections on teaching and learning experiences during the pandemic. Preservice teachers in EFL contexts expressed mixed feelings regarding experiences during COVID-19. Kim (2020) examined the redesign of a preservice teacher education course in early childhood education in Korea during COVID-19 and described three phases of online learning: preparation, implementation, and reflection. The findings showed that preservice teachers had opportunities to interact with children online and reflect on children's cognitive and affective development and learning with online learning tools. Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) focused on Chilean preservice teachers' online teaching placement to explore the challenges and opportunities of virtual teaching during COVID-19. Twenty-seven Chilean EFL preservice teachers participated in the study. An interpretative case approach was employed with an online questionnaire, blog entries, and semi-structured interviews. The findings demonstrated that preservice teachers were significantly influenced by the sudden shift to online teaching and a lack of interaction with learners. Syafryadin et al.'s (2021) study investigated preservice English teachers' perceptions and reflections regarding computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications. Thirty Indonesian EFL preservice teachers expressed their opinions and thoughts on using CALL applications. The findings revealed that most preservice teachers tended to use applications that were affordable and convenient for teaching listening. In addition, preservice teachers in this study faced challenges throughout the entire process of teaching, from connecting to the Internet to the assessment stage. Karimi et al.'s (2021) study explored preservice teachers' beliefs and challenges during teacher education in Iran and identified challenges of demonstrating instructional abilities from theory to practice, the struggle to develop a professional identity, and lack of a relationship between teacher education programs and schools. These studies provide some insights into preservice teachers' challenges and constraints in practice; however, there is a dearth of research on preservice teachers' envisioning and prospects of ELT in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, this study explored EFL preservice teachers' envisioning of English language learning and teaching to establish its solid paradigmatic perspectives in TESOL.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which is crucial in educational research as it enables researchers to deeply understand particular experiences, phenomena, and context (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative research design was the most appropriate for this study because we could observe what exactly happened to the participants, what made them make certain decisions, and why they chose certain topics of their argumentative essays related to education in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Ethnographic methods, including open-ended interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and artifacts, were employed in this study.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted during the "Logic and Essay Writing of English Education" course at a mid-sized university in South Korea. A total of 35 preservice teachers who were juniors

and seniors took this course, and their written argumentative essays were collected with their permission. Fifteen preservice teachers (seven women and eight men) volunteered to be interviewed for this study with convenience sampling. The interviewed participants were between 21 and 29 years of age. All participants pursued an English language education major to become English language teachers.

The "Logic and Essay Writing of English Education" course was a required course for preservice teachers. The main objective of the course was to comprehend the types of academic writing in English. Students learned how to write systematic essays that respond to different sources in texts. The course included three major writing assignments: narrative, comparison/contrast, and argumentative. Argumentative essays were collected for this study as the topic was on post-pandemic English language teaching. The first author was the instructor of the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from multiple sources including interviews with 15 Korean EFL preservice teachers, observations, fieldnotes, and the collection of argumentative essays. All the data were triangulated for rigor and trustworthiness of the research process and findings. First, interviews included open-ended questions, which can help the participants freely share their ideas or thoughts with the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews were particularly essential in understanding the participants' ideas, thoughts, and perceptions on the research topic. Interviews were conducted once or twice, depending on the individual responses, with fifteen participants in-person or via the phone. They were implemented in spring 2021. The overall format of interviews was conversational. Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, with an average time of 35 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview asked about the preservice teachers' views and thoughts on three major themes regarding English language teaching in the post-pandemic era: their envisioning of (1) ELT in general, (2) the roles of English language teachers, and (3) post-pandemic teacher education. The details of the interview questions are shown in Appendix A.

Second, a total of 35 argumentative essays produced in the "Logic and Essay Writing of English Education" course on the topic of English language teaching in the post-pandemic era were gathered. The preservice teachers could choose to write an essay on one of three related sub-themes: (1) preservice teachers' envisioning of ELT, (2) the roles of English language teachers, and (3) post-pandemic teacher education. The essay length ranged from 461 to 1,268 words, with an average of 766 words.

Finally, the researchers observed the participants in and outside of classroom contexts. Observations took place twice a week during the class. In particular, some participants mentored or tutored middle/high school students online; thus, we asked them about their attitudes and perceptions of online mentoring/tutoring. Observations were useful in confirming or disconfirming if certain themes fully represent the situation or the scenes of the context. During the observations, we took field notes to describe the scenes of the context, particularly focusing on how the participants perceived and reacted to this pandemic as future language teachers. Then, the researchers shared what they observed by checking research notes. Theoretical, conceptual, and pedagogical implications were discussed for the significance of the study.

Data were analyzed qualitatively and inductively. Interview data and field notes based on the observations were analyzed qualitatively to identify recurring patterns or themes using the procedures of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enables researchers to distinguish, analyze,

synthesize, and report themes or patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for conducting thematic analyses were utilized: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Recurring patterns and themes were grouped and compared to the interview questions. In addition, the collected essays were analyzed and categorized to identify themes of the given topic.

Member checking was employed to confirm the interpretation of data and analytic categories among participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interviewed participants were asked to participate in a follow-up meeting to confirm the accuracy of the data interpretations. Each participant received a summary of their interview with a request to verify its accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and the preservice teachers were not coerced into participating in the research. All participants gave their written informed consent to participate in this study, including all data collection and use of data for research and publication. We ensured confidentiality and anonymity to protect the participants. Any potential security risk was mitigated during the research period.

Findings

Envisioning English Language Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Era

The participants had divergent opinions on the necessary changes in ELT in the post-pandemic era. First, the participants agreed with the emphasis on human interactions in ELT. They perceived *interaction* as essential in English language teaching and learning during COVID-19. Eight participants argued for the aspects of socialization through student-teacher, teacher-teacher, and student-student interactions in their argumentative essays and interviews. One of the interviewees stated:

> Especially from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences, I realized that English language teaching and learning should be interactive. Recorded online learning is mostly asynchronous because teachers generally video- or audio-record their instruction in the one-way mode; so, there is no such interaction between the teacher and students. Through Zoom or Google Hangout platforms, I found English language classes more interactive and effective (PT2, interview, 12/01/2020). (* 'PT' indicates preservice teacher.)

Second, *task-based teaching* was highlighted by the participants during the interviews. Some participants stated that tasks motivate learners to focus on the instruction and increase participation. In particular, problem-solving tasks were considered effective in activating students' schemata and engaging students in language learning. One participant shared an experience of creating a quiz for peers via an online quiz web in language class:

> Making questions was challenging because I didn't know if the questions were appropriate, but after completing the task, I felt it was very fulfilling and engaging. I felt like a real teacher [for] my peers and an expert of the content. I felt confident in using the technological tool and knowing the part that I worked on (PT4, interview, 12/02/2020).

This may reflect a transition to develop task-based instruction from a solely face-to-face mode to diverse modes, such as online, offline, and mobile, due to the pandemic. English language teachers need to develop effective teaching activities and materials and collaborate with other teachers and professionals to prepare for any circumstances.

Third, *individualization* was another keyword that emerged from the interview data. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Korean students were asked to manage their own learning by

attending online classes at home. In compulsory online classes, many students were expected to be more independent and self-regulated in learning. As such, the participants believed that they were expected to offer instruction that can be self-paced and individualized. Simultaneously, they envisioned that their students would expect more individualized learning in the post-pandmeic era. Therefore, the participants believed that language teachers should be ready for learner-centered individualized curriculum and instruction. To make curriculum and instruction individualized and learner-centered, the participants in this study suggested that implementation of pair work or small group work would be inevitable in ELT.

Furthermore, all participants identified *technology use* as a prominent change in the post-pandemic era, which is in line with the abovementioned ideas of interaction, task-based learning, and individualization. The participants perceived technology was vital and increasing learning in education. Ten preservice teachers wrote about the necessity of technology use in English language education in their argumentative essays. They believed that future English language learning and teaching will heavily rely on technology. Some participants argued that there will be a paradigm shift in language learning, such as technology-related instruction becoming dominant in language learning, with technology-assisted language learning (TALL), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), or mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) becoming the major teaching methodologies in the post-pandemic era. Their envisioning of heavy technology use for ELT could be attributed to their beliefs in the benefits of technology use, as noted below:

> Technology use provides a lot of benefits. For example, it is convenient to give instant and interactive feedback to individual students, and one-to-one individualized instruction would be possible through technology (PT5, interview, 12/02/2020).

> … utilizing technology is effective in terms of providing individual customized education to each student (PT8, argumentative essay).

Similarly, some participants maintained the significance of developing *digital literacy* for teachers, which is individual capability to effectively and responsibly function and perform in a digital era (Falloon, 2020). One participant stated:

> Preservice teachers need to develop a variety of materials and teaching methods [to increase] students' attention, interest, and participation and digital literacy" (PT6, interview, 12/04/2020).

This statement illuminates that the participants perceived digital and technology literacy as a skill that should be acquired in order to become a successful English language teacher in the post-pandemic era.

Envisioning the Roles of English Language Teachers in the Post-Pandemic Era

Another salient topic explored in this study was the roles of English language teachers in the post-pandemic era. Fourteen preservice teachers reflected on and wrote about teacher roles in their argumentative essays. Likewise, interviewed participants discussed this topic. The participants perceived and envisioned two major roles of English teachers in the post-pandemic era. Rather than being a knowledge transmitter or teaching English only, the participants envisioned teachers to be (1) a technological expert and facilitator and (2) a learning partner/mentor.

First, the participants stated that English language teachers should apply effective pedagogy to instruction along with their teaching experiences and technology use as a technical facilitator. Ten participants reported that English language teachers should manage technology professionally and apply it to the instruction efficiently. Two participants commented:

> English language teachers should have the capacity to create interesting and fun contents and activities with technology use. They also need to develop a variety of materials and teaching methods to attract students' attention, interest, and participation. So, it is very important to know how to effectively use technology for language teaching and learning (PT2, interview, 12/01/2020).

> English language teachers should [make] efforts to develop appropriate contents of materials with the use of technology (PT15, interview, 12/03/2020).

In addition, the participants envisioned that a teacher should become a learning partner and mentor. Many interviewed participants argued that English language teachers should be a co-learner and mentor, particularly in the context of online and remote learning, which may be more prevalent in the post-pandemic era:

> The most important thing for English language teachers would be to encourage students to become self-regulated when it comes to online learning…We should become mentors for them in the post-COVID-19 era (PT9, interview, 12/02/2020).

> …teachers should keep remote guidance online and mentoring relationships with their students (PT4, argumentative essay).

> English language teachers should become co-workers with their students in order to accomplish given tasks in parallel positions as helpers (PT1, interview, 12/03/2020).

As such, the pandemic provided the preservice teachers with an opportunity to envision teacher roles for effective language teaching and learning in the post-pandemic period.

Envisioning TESOL Teacher Education in the Post-Pandemic Era

The participants expressed opinions about what preservice teachers should learn in TESOL teacher education programs, with responses falling into two major themes: technology-assisted language teaching methodology and micro-teaching opportunities.

Nine participants specifically addressed the necessity of including technology-assisted language learning and teaching in teacher education programs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students felt puzzled regarding how to cope with online learning. The participants realized that it is necessary to learn more about technology use in ELT, as noted in the previous section. Several participants discussed the utilization of technology tools in English language teaching:

> Preservice teachers should be able to apply technology-assisted language learning with the use of tablets and familiarize themselves with technology use (PT10, interview, 12/13/2020).

> I found the power of technology in the language class…I think technology-assisted English language classes will increase, so I hope we can learn how to effectively use technology tools and multimedia (PT1, interview, 12/03/2020).

In addition, preservice teachers envisioned more opportunities to conduct micro-teaching through teacher education programs. Typically, micro-teaching and teaching simulations are conducted during the teaching practicum in the last year of teacher education in Korea. However, the participants believed that micro-teaching is crucial and should be conducted in more diverse modes, including face-to-face and online, before beginning field experiences, such as the teaching practicum. Several participants stated:

> I would like to have a lot of opportunities [for] micro-teaching. Theoretical knowledge of English language teaching is important, but its application is more important (PT11, interview, 12/04/2020).

> … application ability [micro-teaching] [is] the key for preservice language teachers to be competent in the school context (PT15, interview, 12/03/2020).

The ideas of technology-assisted instructional methodology and micro-teaching are not necessarily new. However, through the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants

came to realize and identify the authentic needs of preservice teachers in teacher education and the teaching skills required during and after the pandemic.

Discussion

Rethinking Teacher Education in TESOL

Moving forward to the "new normal" era, it is crucial to (re)consider the way preservice teachers should be educated and mentored in TESOL teacher education. The participants of this study discussed technology use and their capacities to utilize it, that is, technology and digital literacy, as the most essential components in online instruction during COVID-19. Khan et al. (2021) pointed out that inadequate teacher preparation, lack of familiarity with online pedagogy, and limited knowledge of online assessment were reported to be the major threats in the school context. Fallon (2020) argued that teacher educators should guide preservice teachers to develop digital and technology literacy and competence in using new and emerging technology in future classrooms. The COVID-19 pandemic may be the trigger to place technology at the center of instruction for both preservice and in-service teachers. While envisioning the importance of technology use for ELT, it must be acknowledged that utilizing adequate digital and technological resources and materials can be a major challenge for teachers, as previously revealed by Cho and Clark-Gareca (2020).

The pandemic may lead to a "paradigm shift" for teacher education as the participants pointed out. Classroom technologies are expected to advance in the post-pandemic era. With a variety of technology tools and multimodal teaching and learning resources, preservice teachers should be able to determine useful and affordable technology tools through increasing their technology literacy in the post-pandemic era. Quality teacher education should better respond to diverse needs and characteristics of preservice teachers and increase their digital and technology literacy. Furthermore, teacher educators should enable preservice teachers to discern most appropriate technology tools in various instructional modes such as blended or flipped learning, synchronous class-based learning, and asynchronous video learning contents. Simultaneously, preservice teachers should have opportunities to think about different methods of thinking, reading, writing, learning, teaching, and being with emerging technologies. Discussions regarding the use of innovative technologies for ELT should not be limited to technical or technological conversations. Rather, teacher educators need to engage preservice teachers into epistemological discussions regarding the use of technologies for ELT.

Promoting Professional Development and Collaboration for Preservice Teachers

The participants of this study agreed on the importance of becoming technological experts and facilitators and learning partners and mentors, emphasizing human interaction, task-based teaching, individualization, and effective technology use. Therefore, preservice teachers' professional development should be promoted for the endorsement of preservice teachers as active agents in ELT, which can ensure an effective response to emergencies along with teachers' commitment to thinking, planning, deciding, acting, and sharing of expertise in the educational context (Campbell, 2020; Cilliers, 2000). In-service teachers' coaching and mentoring can be useful for preservice teachers' improvement of pedagogical skills and knowledge in ELT (Trikoilis & Papanastasiou, 2020). Field experiences, such as practicums or student teaching, can be effective and empowering methods for developing and practicing professionalism of preservice teachers. Practice-based field experience would prepare and empower preservice teachers in uncertain post-pandemic circumstances (Bacevich, 2021). In addition, simulated micro-teaching is essential in preparing preservice teachers to be competent in English language teaching.

Furthermore, collaboration is important for preservice teachers. A sense of community should be considered in the post-pandemic era. The participants of this study addressed the importance of interacting and collaborating with students and other teachers, which leads to increasing preservice teachers' autonomy, agency, and empowerment. Both preservice and in-service teachers can support each other by sharing instructional resources and ideas to innovate and expand ELT (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). In addition, preservice teachers should strive to become better communicators by collaborating with students in varied communicative online and offline modes in the post-pandemic era.

Conclusion and Implications

The participants of this study demonstrated their envisioning of ELT, teacher roles, and teacher education in the post-pandemic era. The COVID-19 pandemic, while challenging every aspect of ELT, has provided preservice teachers with opportunities to reflect on the challenges faced in the current educational system, curriculum and instruction and explore and envision a venue to reconsider ELT in uncertain situations. Furthermore, the findings indicated that preservice teachers should act as fully-functioning agents in the post-pandemic era.

It should be noted that this was a small-scale study that may be limited due to insufficient data sources and short study duration. In addition, the findings are not generalizable due to the paradigmatic perspective in qualitative research. However, these limitations can be addressed in future large-scale studies.

Implications of this research are twofold. First, teacher education in the post-pandemic world should be re-envisioned or re-conceptualized. Effective use of technology and development of digital and technology literacy were identified as the major issues for preservice teachers. Therefore, teacher education programs should acknowledge preservice teachers' concerns and needs, ensure a successful transition to prepare them to become effective and successful educators, and demonstrate commitment to achieving goals during teacher training. Second, future research, such as large-scale studies, should examine how preservice teachers implement language instruction and apply their thoughts and reflections to school contexts in practice. It is hoped that this study inspires educators, professionals, and researchers to focus on the envisioning and prospects of preservice teachers in the post-pandemic era.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. Have you thought about the role of secondary schools (middle and high schools)?

2. What do you think would be some major changes in teaching and learning English?

   2-1. Do you think if there will be any changes in terms of teaching and learning English in the post-COVID-19?

2-2. Do you think if the role of technology will be even greater for English language teaching and learning? Then, how and why?

3. Consider the roles and abilities of English language teachers.

3-1. Have you thought if perhaps the role of English teachers would be different in the post COVID-19? What would be the role of English language teachers? -

3-2. What skills, knowledge, dispositions should English language teachers possess the post-COVID-19?

4. How should preservice teachers be prepared in teacher education/training in the post-COVID-19?

5. What would be the right directions toward future education?

6. Is there anything that you feel like you have learned from this unprecedented experience & situation as a future English teacher? If so, what would it be?

7. Tell us anything you'd like to share.