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# Hidden Challenges of Novice English Teachers in a Korean Independent School: Through an Ethnographic Lens

Ju Seong (John) Lee

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, jlee682@illinois.edu*

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## Hidden Challenges of Novice English Teachers in a Korean Independent School: Through an Ethnographic Lens

### Abstract

This study aims to unravel challenges experienced by two novice English teachers in a Korean independent school, the steadily growing education sector worldwide. The author spent 13 months in the participants' natural environment, observing and collecting data through observation field notes, interviews, questionnaires, and cultural probes. A grounded theory approach was adopted to guide the recursive data analysis and identify the themed findings – personal factors (e.g., unrealistic expectations) and sociocultural factors (e.g., school policy and structure). These findings suggest that novice English teachers should obtain accurate information about their new school and actively seek formal and informal support from multiple sources. It offers several practical suggestions for novice teachers and school administrators that would help beginning teachers sustain and succeed in the new teaching environment. More research grounded in this ethnographic approach should be done to address this critical issue in an in-depth, contextualized, and sociocultural manner.

### Keywords

Novice English Teachers, Ethnographic Research, Independent School

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Ju Seong (John) Lee

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA

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When the author (hereafter referred to as “the first participant”) was an English teacher in one of Korea’s independent schools, from 2010 to 2012, five novice English teachers left their profession within two years. In spring of 2013, I began problematizing this issue with two questions: 1) Why is the turnover rate of novice English teachers here so high? and 2) Why aren’t school leaders paying enough attention to this issue? I thought a constant turnover in new English teachers could lead to inconsistent or unsystematic teaching and negatively affect students’ learning of English.

Next, I looked at earlier studies on novice English teachers in English as Second Language (ESL) or English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Several studies have already discussed tensions and challenges experienced by novice English teachers (e.g., Denscombe, 1982; Farrell, 2012; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Richards & Farrell, 2011; Shin, 2012; Weinstein, 1988). However, I was not able to find any research on challenges of novice English teachers in an EFL independent school context, a rapidly emerging but still unknown one in the field. Moreover, nearly 71% of the studies on L2 teacher issues have been done quantitatively in Korea, which could hardly provide an in-depth understanding of novice English teachers in this unique teaching context (Kim, 2010).

To fill these gaps, the current study aims to unravel challenges experienced by two novice English teachers in an EFL independent school context. Toward these ends, I employed the key ethnographic method of *participant observation*, spending 13 months in the participants’ natural environment (i.e., an independent school), observing and collecting data through observation field notes, interviews, questionnaires, and cultural probes.

This ethnographic inquiry is expected to make several contributions to the current literature. Theoretically, these findings enhance our understanding of novice language teachers by providing additional cases of independent schoolteachers in the field. Methodologically, this approach sheds light on the importance of adopting an ethnographic lens to address this critical issue in an in-depth, contextualized, and sociocultural manner. Practically, it may offer

several suggestions for novice language teachers and school administrators that would help the novice teachers sustain their efforts and succeed in a new teaching environment.

## Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on challenges experienced by novice teachers in the field of general education. Such studies have attempted to explain a range of issues, such as challenges for preservice teachers (e.g., Corcoran, 1981; Fuller, 1969; Kulik & Mahler, 1987; Silvernail & Costello, 1983; Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein, 1988; Ryan, 1979; Veenman, 1984), the role of mentoring novice teachers (e.g., Delaney, 2012; Loftrom & Eisenschmidt, 2009), and the effect of school structure on novice teachers (e.g., Pataniczek & Isaacson, 1981). In recent years, a growing body of research has investigated various topics with regard to novice language teachers in ESL/EFL contexts: the gap between expectations and the classroom realities (e.g., Baecher, 2012; Farrell, 2003; Farrell, 2008; Farrell, 2009; Farrell, 2012), teacher persona (e.g., Farrell, 2003, 2006; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Liu & Fisher, 2006; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001; Pennington & Richards, 1997; Richards & Pennington, 1998; Tsui, 2007), and teacher cognition in language teaching (e.g., Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1993; Richards et al., 1998; Smith, 1996; Spada & Massey, 1992; Tsui, 1996).

It is Farrell's (2012, p. 435) work (published in a special issue on Novice Professionals in *TESOL Quarterly*), however, that has drawn our considerable attention to *novice-service language teacher development*: "the [transitional period] from teacher preparation to the first years of teaching." He points out that novice teachers who are unable to survive the first "reality shock" in a real classroom during this period often leave their profession in the early stage of their career (also see Crookes, 1997; Peacock, 2009). In his seminal study, Veenman (1984, p. 143) attributes such "reality shock" to "the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life." This initial shock becomes aggravated as many novice teachers are often left alone in a "sink-or-swim" or "boot camp" situations to face various dilemmas (Farrell, 2015; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Varah et al., 1986). Previous studies have reported that novice teachers face this initial shock due to personal factors such as unrealistic expectations (Baecher, 2012; Densgombe, 1982; Farrell, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2012; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Weinstein, 1988). For instance, Weinstein (1988, p. 39) indicates that novice teachers often have a sense of "unrealistic optimism" such as classroom management and motivating students prior to walking into a real classroom (and face the subsequent shock of reality).

However, Johnson (2006) points out when dealing with foreign language teachers it is necessary to take into account several variables in addition to personal factors. She presents a good example (e.g., South Korea's national curricula) of why it is necessary to examine second language (L2) teachers at several levels (e.g., local, social, political contexts). Citing studies of Kim (2005) and Li (1998), Johnson illustrates how the national curricula (which places greater emphasis on communicative language teaching) leads to failure in classroom implementation due to inadequate consideration of "the limited oral language proficiency of the local teaching force, the washback effect of the grammar-translation-oriented examination system, and normative ways of schooling that South Korean teachers and their students are socialized into" (p. 246). In other words, when investigating novice English teachers, we should also take into account the effects of broader macrostructures (e.g., institutional structure, curricular mandates) on their classroom practices. Johnson's perspective aligns with Block's (2003) and Said and Zhang's (2014) works that stress the needs of drawing on more socially informed standpoints in TESOL and Applied Linguistics research. Consequently, Johnson's sociocultural perspective helps us take into account novice language teachers from broader perspectives (e.g., sociocultural and sociopolitical aspects), which allow many ESL/EFL

scholars and practitioners to attempt to examine the effects of sociocultural and sociopolitical factors on novice language teachers (e.g., Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Shin, 2012).

Although extensive research has been carried out on novice language teachers in the field, this concern is not fully addressed in EFL independent schools. To the author's knowledge, there is no single research study on the challenges that novice English teachers face in the EFL Korean independent school context. In particular, since nearly 71% of the studies on L2 teacher issues in Korean contexts are quantitative research, we can hardly understand challenges of novice teachers who are teaching in such peculiar but unknown sociocultural teaching contexts such as the independent school (e.g., a nontraditional and flexible curriculum and instruction not funded and governed by state governments) (Kim, 2010).

To fill the void, the current study aims to unravel challenges experienced by two novice English teachers in an EFL independent school context. I adopt an ethnographic study in order to address this critical issue in an in-depth, contextualized, and sociocultural manner.

Specifically, this ethnographic inquiry was undertaken to address the following research question: "What challenges did the novice English teachers face during their first year of teaching in a Korean independent school context?"

## Methodology

### Context and Participants

The investigation took place at an independent school (hereafter referred to as *I School*) in South Korea. Just like independent schools in Australia, U.K. and North America, independent schools in South Korea is one of the fastest and steadily growing education sectors (e.g., Independent Schools Council of Australia, <http://isca.edu.au/2016/05/isca-announces-release-of-snapshot-2016/>). This school is not governed by the national curriculum. Thus, its main curriculum and instructional approach is a nontraditional and flexible one.

*I School's* curriculum constitutes the core classes (e.g., Korean, Mathematics, Science, English/Chinese, etc.) as well as several electives (e.g., art and craft, creative playing, music, and cooking). Over 80 teachers work at this school, including residential teachers (who live on campus) and commuting instructors (who come and teach on a weekly basis). In English department, there are seven Korean teachers and three foreign teachers.

Since the government does not financially support *I School*, the tuition fee is much higher than is the case for Korea's regular secondary schools. The school has approximately 300 students, ranging from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades. A majority of the students come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In terms of university admission, nearly 30 % of the students enter university on a rolling admission, 20% are admitted through university entrance examination, 25% study abroad (mainly in U.S.A., Japan, and Mainland China), and 25% are repeaters.

The participants in this study include one novice female Canadian Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST), Kathy (pseudonym), and one novice male Korean Non-Native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST), Mark (pseudonym). In light of Farrell's (2012) definition of novice teachers (i.e., newly qualified teachers who start teaching English in a new institution within three years), Kathy and Mark are qualified as novice English teachers in this study. Kathy was qualified at a bachelor's level with a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certification. She had teaching experience in a Canadian community. Mark earned a doctorate from North America. He had teaching experience in Canada at the university level. Mark was an expert speaker of English, with a near-native-speaker level. Although Kathy and

Mark had no teaching experience in Korea's independent school context, they were highly motivated to teach in an independent school (against Korea's public and private K-12 education). From 2013 to 2014, Kathy taught English writing and conversation to junior high school-level students (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> graders) while Mark taught English reading and writing to high school-level students (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders).

When the participants officially became teachers, they agreed to participate in this ethnographic study. During the consent process, ethical research practice to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality were informed: (1) The researcher only uses the data that the participants feel comfortable with, (2) Only the researcher can have access to the data, and (3) All identifiers are removed.

During the data collection periods, I was responsible for supervising both Kathy and Mark as the head English teacher of the Department. My roles as a supervisor, colleague, and participant observer allowed me to capture and interpret the phenomenon of the current inquiry (i.e., challenges of the novice English teachers during the first year of teaching) in a more natural and accessible manner, as I could closely observe and interact with them in various contexts (e.g., classroom lessons, meal time, teacher meeting, school event, etc.). A variety of methods (for triangulating the data) collected over an extended period of time (i.e., thirteen months) also helped me obtain even more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (see "Data collection" for details). After the data collection, I quit my teaching job in *I School*, moved to the United States for my doctoral work, and started analyzing the data, which helped me make the familiar data strange (Geertz, 1988). All these extensive and systematic procedures have helped me gather sufficient and reliable data and construe the findings adequately.

## Data Collection

The ethnographic method was used for data collection, based on the idea "that in order to understand what people are up to, it is best to observe them by interacting with them intimately and over an extended period" (Monaghan & Just, 2000, p. 13). Also, I strove to balance "between trying to understand people's perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behavior more distantly, in ways that may be alien (and perhaps even objectionable) to them" (Hammersley, 2006, p. 11). As a result, from February 2013 to March 2014, I used the *participant observation* method, which allowed me to collect sufficient data through observation field notes, interviews, questionnaires, and the cultural probe in the participants' natural environment (e.g., Baker, 2006; Nunan, 1992).

The observation data was useful in a non-manipulative way, in that Kathy and I shared the same classroom and my classroom was located adjacent to Mark's (Nunan, 1992). Since I was living adjacent to Kathy and Mark's home, I often socialized with them, which also helped me obtain raw, authentic data in "unobtrusive" real-life social situations. Classroom observations also took place during the study period in the following sequence: (1) I met with them before the classroom observation and discussed the goals of the class and any particular concerns regarding the observations; (2) I observed their teaching and classroom interaction. All observation data relevant to the research question was recorded in my field notes at the end of that day; and (3) I arranged a debriefing meeting with them and discussed my analysis.

The interview data—another common ethnographic data collection method—was obtained in two forms: (1) an informal interview "that occurred, unplanned, as a part of fieldwork" and (2) a semi-structured interview in which "specific questions are followed with questions not in the original protocol" (Khoo et al., 2012, p. 85). From February 2013 to January 2014 I adopted a "romantic conception of interviewing" position for an informal interview in which I first established trust with Kathy and Mark prior to eliciting rich, authentic

data in a real-life setting (Roulston, 2010, p. 217). On February-March 2014, I conducted a more focused, semi-structured interview, starting with broad questions and moving to semi-structured questions in a quiet, semi-private place (e.g., coffee shops; Khoo et al., 2012; Merton et al., 1956, 1990). For example, I asked them about their personal and professional background, and then we talked about the tensions and challenges they encountered in school. On February 2014, the semi-structured interview occurred a total of four times with Mark and Kathy. The last interview for both participants was set up for clarification and asking additional questions based on the interview transcriptions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Each interview lasted for nearly an hour. I took brief notes during both informal and semi-structured interview if the data happened to be relevant to the research question. Later, those notes were reviewed and summarized again in my computer.

On March 2014, the questionnaire data was gathered via email. The questionnaire questions were developed, piloted, and revised based on the field notes and informal interview data (see Appendix A for the questionnaire). The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain deeper insights into the research question and clarify/confirm the intended meaning of the participants' responses.

Finally, the cultural probe, which "subjects can use to record and self-report on areas and actions in their life that are important to the researcher," was also obtained on March 2014 (Khoo et al., 2012, p. 85). Participants' self-reflective teaching journals were collected, which helped me understand their in-class situations.

## Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was adopted to guide the recursive data analysis and identify the themed findings (Chan & Gao, 2014; Gao, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I merely used grounded theory procedures to conduct a thematic analysis rather than following the typical grounded theory series of codes (i.e., open, axial, and theoretical selective coding) in order to identify the major themes emerging from the triangulated data (Charmaz, 2006). In the recursive analysis of the observation field notes (N=141), initial codes of the challenges experienced by the two novice English teachers were developed and continually revised. For instance, the first reading of the field notes allowed me to obtain a general understanding of the research issue. Beginning from the second and third readings, I made a concerted effort to identify key (and recurring) themes about both teachers. In the fourth and fifth readings, I consciously considered particular temporal and contextual contexts in order to deeply and accurately identify and extract the recurring themes, which resulted in five major frames: unrealistic expectations, negative teacher belief, inadequate pedagogical skills, unique school culture, and complex social-political issues.

Subsequently, the semi-structured interview data for Kathy and Mark were transcribed verbatim in English and double-checked for accuracy. Then, I repeated the same analytical procedures when analyzing the data from the semi-structured interview, the questionnaire and the cultural probe. The difference this time, though, was that I categorized various themes emerged and extracted from those data into the initial codes (i.e., five themes), which helped turn the initial codes into more robust codes. That is, I tried to identify how the themes emerging from the interview, questionnaire and cultural probe could be linked with the initial codes and thus combined into five major themes.

In the final step, data relevant to subjects' past experiences, such as unrealistic expectations, negative teacher beliefs, inadequate pedagogical skills and complex social-political issues, were combined into one theme as personal factors, after which the codes were reduced to two major frames to structure the current findings: (1) Personal factors and (2) sociocultural factors (see Table 1, which illustrates the codes with data extracts). Lastly, both

novice English teachers were involved in the reading of the two themes, after which these themes were confirmed and became the final codes. All in all, aforementioned quality control measures (e.g., ethical practice, triangulation, member checking, internal consistency of the data and systematic approach to the analysis) helped interpret data by avoiding (or minimizing) the potential impact of the researcher's biases (LeCompte, 2000).

### Findings

After multiple readings of the data, the analysis showed that Kathy and Mark experienced two major challenges as novice English teachers in *I School*, as reflected in Table 1. Many of them echo the challenges recorded in previous study in other contexts. Such challenges for Kathy and Mark are closely examined, respectively, in terms of personal and sociocultural factors, as follows:

Table 1. Two major themes emerging from the triangulated data

Themes	Instruments	Kathy	Mark
Personal Factors	Field-notes	It is different from what I thought (May 21, 2013)	In reality, students have little motivation (May 19, 2013)
	Interview	A gap between my expectation and reality (Mar. 18, 2014)	Handle this hectic schedule (Mar. 03, 2014)
	Questionnaire & Cultural Probe	Come with no preconceived notions or expectations (Mar. 25, 2014)	I would expect this school to be like the Canadian university (Mar. 25, 2014)
Sociocultural Factors	Field-notes	A new teacher policy should be created (Dec. 4, 2013)	Current school structure causes the lack of collaboration (Nov. 18, 2013)
	Interview	School should improve on connecting L2 teachers with other L2 teachers (Mar. 11, 2014)	Structural problem (Mar. 10, 2014)
	Questionnaire & Cultural Probe	Dilemma. My teaching is ineffective. Behavior and learning levels is my greatest challenge (March 28, 2014)	I can't make time to develop a relationship with my colleague (Mar. 25, 2014)

Notes: Only one data item in each category is presented in this table to illustrate the coding process with data extracts as an example. In the full coding table, there are multiple items across each category.

#### Personal Factors: Unrealistic Expectations

Kathy encountered challenges in *I School* due to personal factors (i.e., unrealistic expectations), as shown in the interview: "There was a gap between my expectation and reality. The students were very talkative...I thought they all spoke perfect English" (Mar. 18, 2014).



As can be seen from the extract above, Kathy experienced a discrepancy between what she expected and what she faced in terms of the characteristics of her target students. Kathy's account was also supported by other observation field notes in which she said, "Students are different...it is different from what I thought" (May 21, 2013) and "Things were very difficult for me because I always compared this experience to my past time in Korea" (Jan. 20, 2014). Another observation field note (Jan. 25, 2014) and the questionnaire (Mar. 25, 2014) revealed how she developed such biased ideas (e.g., talkative Korean students with perfect English) about English learners of Korean adolescents. Kathy learned about the Korean EFL students on a trip to Korea from her Korean friend who was teaching English in a private institute. That is, her Korean friend's teaching experience was the main source of her motivation and conceptualization for teaching English in Korea, which led to "reality shock" in *I School* throughout her experience as a novice English teacher. This challenge should have been taken more seriously because it also affected her teaching in the classroom: "Ninth graders are doing speech, debate, presentation course...I don't know what to do...I am not sure what will motivate them to participate. I am losing my confidence in my teaching ability" (Cultural probe from Kathy's reflective journal, Mar. 8, 2014).

In short, Kathy's prior conception of Korean students led her to implement a variety of communicative activities (e.g., speech, debate), which unfortunately turned out to be a mismatch with actual needs of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in *I school* (e.g., grammar, reading). In the questionnaire, Kathy did confess how such personal factors (e.g., preconceived notions about her students) negatively affected her teaching. She suggested the following: "Come with no preconceived notions or expectations. Find out as much information as you can about where you are going" (Mar. 25, 2014).

Mark also struggled in *I School*, owing to personal factors (i.e., unrealistic expectations). The difference is his expectations mainly stemmed from his previous teaching experience at a Canadian university. The observation field note (Oct. 14, 2013) indicated that past teaching experience at a Canadian university was responsible for his unrealistic anticipation of teaching in Korea: "On vacation, I was expected to attend at seminars or conferences. I would also like to spend time translating from Latin and Greek texts into Korean...Nowadays, I feel strongly I was very wrong." In the early stage, he expected to engage in several professional activities (e.g., conference presenter or translator) during his leisure time in addition to teaching English in *I School* because he used to play those roles while teaching students in Canada. This phenomenon was also consistent with the questionnaire (Mar. 25, 2014): "I would expect this school to be like the Canadian university. There, teachers could freely involve professional development in the evening, but here, in reality, that was impossible." The interview data also supported this account of his: "This semester I have been praying hard always to handle this hectic schedule [and do other activities]" (Mar. 03, 2014).

It can be implied that his eight years of living and working in Canada (where nine to five was the norm) also attributed to making him become challenged professionally in the *I School* context. Additionally, it is worth noting how his unrealistic expectations toward the school also affected his expectations toward his students, as indicated in the observation field note: "I thought this school concentrated highly on the autonomous learning... In reality, students have little or almost no ability and motivation to sustain their learning themselves" (May 19, 2013). This comment may indicate that since he became accustomed to teaching self-directed Canadian college students for several years, he encountered a perceived gap between his previous experience and his current reality in working with Korean students.

Finally, both Kathy and Mark faced challenges in *I School* due to unrealistic expectations toward "national university entrance examination." This finding was particularly intriguing because the teachers, Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST) and Non-Native

English Speaking Teacher (NNEST) alike, who chose this independent education in favor of public and private K-12 education, were still under the influence of this competitive university entrance exam. The data for Kathy revealed how her pedagogy had been changed to accommodate the students' academic needs (e.g., English grammar). Her questionnaire (Mar. 20, 2014) indicated, "They have little desire to listen and a will of their own to talk to each other. This makes it difficult to teach." As indicated earlier in the cultural probe (Mar. 8, 2014), Kathy confronted difficulties in teaching communicative skills such as speech and presentation, as her Korean students were not motivated to learn such productive skills. In an interview (Mar. 25, 2014), Kathy pointed out, "In an independent EFL school context, the advice is to embrace your experience. It is unlike any other. This is the time to try new things." Here, she implied that the communicative language activities that worked well in the ESL context, as had been the case in Canada, did not work in the EFL independent school context. Kathy also pointed out that her 9<sup>th</sup> graders often mentioned the importance of standardized tests, such as TOEIC and TOEFL, as well as the university entrance examination, which led her to modify her teaching pedagogy, as indicated in an observation field note (Nov. 19, 2013): "I learned that I would need to design my lesson considering Korean culture and situation. I will try to teach grammar while practicing communication." This data showed that Kathy attempted to adjust her initial teaching methodology to meet her students' academic needs, although she, in part, still maintained her communicative language teaching approach.

Mark also experienced challenges in *I School* due to unrealistic expectations toward "national university entrance examination." Mark pointed out that the students were passive about and unmotivated toward studying English inside and outside of the classroom, as described in a observation field note (May 19, 2013): "I was puzzled by a majority of students who were demotivated and passive in learning English in class...lethargic during the self-study session." As briefly mentioned earlier, Mark expected that the students in *I School* would be different from those in the Korea's regular schools in terms of autonomous learning since it was an independent school. As indicated in an interview (Mar. 03, 2014), however, he was astonished to see how the national test also weighed heavily upon the students' minds, affecting their language learning and even the school curriculum: "Students learn English for the college entrance examination. I didn't know what to do with the students who disliked English, were bored, and even slept during the class. I didn't expect I would need to motivate them to study English." *I School* (e.g., preparing for college entrance examination just like the public school) was in stark contrast to what he thought it would take place (e.g., implementing an independent education), and this very fact put Mark in a dilemma, which was described in the questionnaire (Nov. 18, 2013): "The school is under the pressure of college entrance examinations in real circumstances although it may seem to have a range of programs including extra-curricula activities and good character training programs. To me, the school seems to be bound by this national test, placing more weight on preparing students for the college over character and true education."

In short, both Kathy and Mark struggled due to their unrealistic expectations – such as preconceived notions about her students (Kathy), the working experience in Canada (Mark), and the effect of national university entrance examination on their pedagogy (Kathy and Mark).

### **Sociocultural Factors: School Policy and Structure**

Kathy experienced difficulties in *I School* due to sociocultural factors. In particular, she indicated one peculiar feature – "unstructured school policy for NEST." According to the observation field note (Dec. 4, 2013), Kathy pointed out,

A new teacher policy should be created...the protocol will deal with who does the airport pickup...Also a binder that could contain all important information like doctors, shopping centers, bus schedules and routes, emergency contact, and anything that will help an L2 teacher get along in a new city.

Since there was no systematic policy for a new NEST, she struggled during the first couple of months, which affected her physical and psychological health, as indicated in the observation field note (Dec. 11, 2013): “I was not eating properly, which made me very malnourished as said by the doctor...I was very homesick.” She also mentioned that this unstructured system also negatively affected her teaching in the classroom, as shown in an interview (Mar. 11, 2014): “I think assistance in adjusting to the classroom and the type of materials I would need was not attended to. I was extremely at a loss when it came to teaching and what materials to use.” The cultural probe of her two reflective journals also supported this account: “Today was difficult. I have not been well this week and it has been very hard to get control of the classroom” (Mar. 21, 2014) and: “Dilemma. My teaching is ineffective. I am not sure what to teach that will motivate them to learn and be enjoyable. It is extremely difficult to teach when no one is listening” (Mar. 28, 2014). As a solution, she suggests that the school would need to pay more attention to professional assistance through a more systematic approach, as indicated in the following interview segment (Mar. 11, 2014): “School should improve on connecting NEST with other NESTs...Extra classroom coaching for new teachers...allowing the L2 teacher to observe classroom dynamics before teaching... partnership with L1 teachers in the way of curriculum creation...talking with the head of the department weekly can assist the new L2 teacher.”

Mark also struggled in *I School* due to the sociocultural factors – specifically an “uncooperative school structure.” The observation field note reveals, “Throughout eleven months of his initial teaching, Mark frequently used words ‘very hectic,’ ‘chaotic,’ and ‘uncooperative’ when describing the school culture” (Nov. 18, 2013). Mark also mentioned that the unstable and uncooperative school structure lay at the root of teachers’ hectic schedule and lack of collaboration. He elaborated on this point in interview (Mar. 10, 2014) in which he said, “Teachers here would need to take on multiple roles simultaneously, including parental care toward their students apart from minimal responsibilities (e.g., teaching, administrative chores). This structural problem decreased the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers.” This lack of collaboration and communication with his colleagues, according to the observation field note (Nov. 18, 2013), left him feeling isolated and unassisted. Echoing this phenomenon, a response on a questionnaire (Mar. 25, 2014) also showed how such a school structure kept him from maintaining a balanced life: “Teachers here engage in a lot of work. They can’t have time for personal rest, family time, and professional development. Due to the daily tight schedule, I can’t make time to develop a relationship with my colleague.”

To sum up, on the question of sociocultural factors, this study found that both Kathy and Mark experienced challenges due to the unstructured school policy for NEST (Kathy) and an uncooperative school structure (Mark).

## Discussion

### Personal Factors: Unrealistic Expectations

During their first year of teaching, Kathy and Mark, faced difficulties in *I School* due to their unrealistic expectations – preconceived notions about her students (Kathy) and the working experience in Canada (Mark), and the effect of national university entrance examination on their pedagogy (Kathy and Mark). Indeed, previous research on novice teachers

confirms that unrealistic expectations lead to reality shock (Baecher, 2012; Densgombe, 1982; Farrell, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2012; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Weinstein, 1988). Weinstein (1988) points out that the beginning teachers often encounter “unrealistic optimism” (39) and thus would need to obtain accurate information about their teaching contexts. In this light, both Kathy and Mark were too optimistic about *I School* and its students without having sufficient, accurate information. Farrell (2012) urges novice English teachers to share their stories and experiences (that reflect those teachers’ particular teaching environment) with outside audiences to minimize such unrealistic shock from taking place. It is unfortunate, however, that up to now there is limited opportunity for novice English teachers in an independent school – Kathy and Mark, for instance – to freely express their opinions and receive support from others who are in a similar teaching context. For this set of circumstances, Freeman and Johnson (1998) also suggest a partnership model between the school and English teacher education program in a university setting. At a more micro-level (and more realistically), Densgombe (1982) emphasizes that novice English teachers should receive direct help from the senior teachers or more experienced colleagues through team-teaching or classroom observation.

As for unrealistic expectations toward the national university entrance examination, the washback effect of the national test among English teachers has not been a new phenomenon in Korea. Instead, previous work has reported on the washback effects of national tests on English teaching and learning in the classroom (Choi, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Kim, 2005; Lee, 2009; Li, 1998). More recently, Kim (2009) has pointed out that an English test and education policy (e.g., developing and introducing the Korean version of TOEFL) greatly affects the perceptions of teachers and students in Korea’s secondary schools. The data from this study provide evidence that novice English teacher in EFL independent schools can also experience challenge due to the national test. What is intriguing and even surprising here is that the independent school (whose curriculum and instruction are implemented independently of the national mandates) and its novice English teachers are heavily affected by the national tests, a result that has not previously been described. As previously mentioned, *I School* was launched as an educational movement against the conventional educational system, such as a test-driven curriculum and instruction. When the author was an English teacher during 2010-2012 in the *I School*, this phenomenon was less salient. Starting from Spring 2013, however, the school began introducing and implementing some “controversial” practices that most of the Korea’s regular schools began using, as follows: (1) Eliminate the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade English class taught by NESTs (to focus more on reading and grammar for the national test), (2) carve out the time for English listening class every morning (since the listening questions accounted for nearly 50% of the English test in the college entrance examination in 2014), and (3) require 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to take a mock national test on a regular basis. These “controversial” practices even caused teachers in the *I School* to have a heated debate over school identity. It also affected new English teachers such as Kathy and Mark in terms of their pedagogical decision-making in the classroom and overall satisfaction with the school, as was illustrated in this study. The reason why *I School* is under the pressure of the national test is beyond the scope of this study. Further work, which takes this issue into account, will need to be undertaken.

Taken together, this result suggests that novice teachers’ prior notions or experiences may contribute to unrealistic expectations. They are encouraged to obtain accurate information in advance about a prospective new school. This finding also has important implications for the school administrators and existing teachers (e.g., senior teachers), who should be more sensitive to issues of novice English teachers, which would help both groups assimilate well into a new environment.

## Sociocultural Factors: School Policy and Structure

On the question of sociocultural factors, this study found that both Kathy and Mark experienced challenges due to the unstructured school policy for NEST (Kathy) and an uncooperative school structure (Mark). This finding is consistent with previous research on this subject (e.g., Richards & Farrell, 2011; Shin, 2012). For instance, Shin (2012) revealed that the professional performance of novice English teachers (e.g., choice of medium of instruction) was determined not by personal factors (e.g., individual English abilities) but by sociocultural factors (e.g., institutional constraints and school culture). In light of Shin's work, we see that Kathy was also restricted in her professional and personal life because of the already established norms in *I School* with regard to personnel management (i.e., the school policy toward a novice NEST). Previous work has suggested that this issue could be alleviated through formal and informal support from multiple sources, including colleagues, senior teachers, mentors, and family (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Mann & Tang, 2012; Farrell, 2015).

However, this implication cannot be extrapolated to all novice English teachers, such as a NNEST like Mark. Although Lee (2009) found that sociopolitical factors (e.g., the washback effect of national tests) and sociocultural factors (e.g., heavy administrative work) played critical roles in impeding teachers' professional development, Korea's longstanding traditional values (e.g., Confucianism) could also prevent Korean teachers of English such as Mark from collaborating with colleagues. In other words, there is the possibility that a novice NNEST may not get the support from his or her colleagues even in the independent school because they are still working in the Korean context (although its cultural atmosphere is more non-traditional and flexible than the regular schools.)

## Conclusion

This study examined how two novice English teachers faced challenges in an EFL independent school context. The findings revealed that these two participants had difficulties in terms of personal factors (e.g., unrealistic expectations as a result of preconceived notions about students, the previous working experience, and unexpected influence of national university entrance examination) and sociocultural factors (e.g., school policy and structure). These two major dilemmas may be attributed to the high turnover rate of novice English teachers.

Based on the findings of this study, the author offers the following recommendations for practice: (1) Novice English teachers should obtain accurate information in advance without any preconceived notion about their new school; (2) They need to actively seek formal and informal support from multiple sources, including colleagues, senior teachers, mentors, and family; (3) School administrators and existing teachers (e.g., senior teachers) should pay more attention issues that novice English teachers have, which would help the novice teachers better assimilate into the new environment.

It must be noted that this ethnographic inquiry only explored the novice English teachers in one independent school. Given the limited scope of the research, future study should explore how novice English teachers experience challenges in other ESL or EFL independent schools. The study also had only two novice English teachers. Although this study achieved an in-depth understanding of major challenges experienced by these particular participants, research needs to explore the same question with other subjects.

However, the findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature. First, theoretically, these findings enhance our understanding of novice English teachers by providing additional cases of the independent schoolteachers in the field. Methodologically, this study sheds light on the importance of adopting an ethnographic lens

for addressing this critical issue in an in-depth, contextualized and sociocultural manner. This study offers several practical suggestions for novice English teachers and school administrators, which would help beginning English teachers adjust and succeed in a new teaching environment.

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### Appendix A

1. Describe your personal and professional background in regard to your current institution. (If possible, attach your C.V.)
2. Why have you chosen this profession? Why did you decide to work in this school?
3. What were your expectations about this school before actually coming here? Have you identified or experienced any gap between your prior assumptions and the current realities in the school during your first year of teaching?
4. If so, can you describe in detail these tensions and challenges you have encountered? (e.g., classroom, relationship with colleagues, school curriculum, school culture)
5. How did you negotiate such difficulties? Describe your specific actions taken to tackle them.
6. In your estimation, does the school pay proper attention to the wellbeing of novice second language (L2) teachers? On a scale of 1-10, can you measure its attention level?
7. In your estimation, what are the policies the school needs to improve to help novice L2 teachers fully assimilate into the school? What changes would you suggest to the principal?
8. When it comes to enhancing the wellbeing of L2 novice teachers, do you have some suggestions for the school leaders or policy-makers?
9. What advice can you give to pre-service teachers or L2 novice teachers who are seriously considering a teaching career in an EFL alternative school context?

Thank you for your answers.

### Author Note

Ju Seong (John) Lee is a PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interest includes Ethnography (Qualitative) Research, Teacher Preparation/Development, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (particularly Videoconferencing and Informal Digital Learning of English), and English as an International Language (EIL). Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [jlee682@illinois.edu](mailto:jlee682@illinois.edu).

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