The English Connection

A Korea TESOL Publication

Spring 2026, Volume 30, Issue 1

Preview to the KOTESOL International Conference 2026

"Criticality, Innovation, and Compassion: Rethinking Language Education in Times of Change"

Invited Speakers' Interviews and Articles

And our regular columnists...

Snyder with The Development Connection

Kimball with The Classroom Connection

Kelly with The Brain Connection

Contact us:

KoreaTESOL.org

TEC@KoreaTESOL.org

KOREA TESOL

KOTESOL

대한영어교육학회

The English Connection

Editorial Team

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Andrew White

Editing and Proofreading
Wesley Martin
Dr. David E. Shaffer
J. Tom Wyatt

Publications Comm. Chair & Production Editor
Dr. David E. Shaffer

Layout and Design
Mijung Lee
Media Station, Seoul

Printing
Bansuk Printing, Seoul

Photo & Image Credits

Front Cover Image: *Birds and Flowers*, unidentified artist, https://www.metmuseum.org

This page image: *Birds and Flowers* (detail)
Page 5 image: Eva, pexels.com
Page 8-9 images: courtesy the author
Page 10-11 images: courtesy the author
Page 12-13 images: courtesy the author
Page 14-15 images: courtesy the author
Page 16-17 images: courtesy the author
Page 18-19 images: courtesy the author
Page 20-21 images: courtesy the author
Page 22-23 images: courtesy the author
Page 24-25 images: courtesy the author
Page 26 image: RDNE Stock Project, pexels.com
Page 27 image: Mike, pexels.com
Page 28 image: Beastfromeast, Getty Images
Page 29 image: Mikhail Nilov, pexels.com
Page 30 image: Bojagi, Smithsonian Design Museum
Page 30 graph: Johnson & Newport, 1989
Page 31 image: TED Talk, www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2XBIkHW954

Suggestions and Contributions: **tec@koreatesol.org**

Submissions Deadline for the Summer 2026 Issue: April 6th (Mon.)

The English Connection, published quarterly, is the official magazine of Korea Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (KOTESOL), an academic organization, and is distributed free of charge as a service to the members of KOTESOL.

ISSN: 1598-0456

KOREA TESOL
KOTESOL
대한영어교육학회

Contents

Spring 2026 / Volume 30, Issue 1

KOREA TESOL
KOTESOL
대한영어교육학회

To promote scholarship, disseminate information, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding among persons concerned with the teaching and learning of English in Korea.

Editorial

From Monochrome to Masterpiece: IC2026 Painting the Future of Language Education

By Dr. Andrew White Editor-in-Chief, *The English Connection*

Imagine a Monday morning in a modern English language classroom in Seoul, Busan, or anywhere in between. The lighting is bright, the Wi-Fi is seamless, and perhaps an AI-integrated dashboard sits open on the teacher's tablet. In 2026, we are no longer handcuffed to rigid, government-mandated scripts; many of us enjoy a reasonable degree of freedom to choose our materials and methods. Yet, despite these upgrades, a familiar "monochrome" atmosphere often persists. The desks remain in their disciplined rows, the students sit in a polite silence (or a noisy, unfocused hum, as the case may be), and a heavy silence lingers – the weight of "test-driven accountability" and the "face-saving" concerns of students who remain, too often, silent observers of their own education. We have the tools and the autonomy, yet many of us find ourselves stuck in the gravitational pull of tradition, wondering how to turn "communicative competence" from a lesson objective into a living reality.

As we look toward the upcoming KOTESOL International Conference, **"Criticality, Innovation, and Compassion: Rethinking Language Education in Times of Change,"** we are invited to pick up the brush. Through the insights of our nine invited speakers, we can begin to paint over this static classroom, layering new textures of insight, imagination, and heart. We move from a grey canvas of routine to a masterpiece of intentional practice.

This transformation begins with the foundation of the canvas: the teacher's professional well-being. Plenary **Thomas Farrell** argues this is a necessity, noting: "Reflection is not a method, it is a way of life... The results of engaging in such reflective practice may mean an affirmation of current practices or making changes, but these changes will not be based on impulse or tradition; they will emerge as a result of analysis of concrete evidence." For the Korean teacher, this means moving beyond routine. It is the difference between assigning a worksheet by habit and choosing a task because data shows it truly sparks student engagement.

Supporting this structural foundation is **Kyungja Ahn**, who bridges the gap between high-level policy and the reality of the staffroom. She advocates for implementation support that is "practical and sustained," moving away from abstract mandates toward "doable" instructional routines and collaborative lesson design. For the teacher in the Korean context, this means that innovation is not a solitary burden, but a communal effort supported by coaching and classroom-based inquiry. By framing our autonomy within this flexible, resource-rich framework, we ensure our creative choices aren't just isolated flashes of color, but part of a sustainable masterpiece that respects the unique needs of our specific school communities.

As we add the first layers of color, we face the classroom "battlefield". Plenary **Nathanael Rudolph** shatters the illusion that we "just teach English," observing that language education is a space where different ways of "knowing, being, and doing are competing". In Korea, this involves negotiating notions of "Koreanness" within every textbook. This criticality is given form by **Michael Rabbidge**, who advocates for "translanguaging" to disrupt the anxiety-inducing "English-only" mask. Rabbidge views this as a stance: "Allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires acknowledges that thinking, feeling, and learning do not happen in one language... it creates safer spaces for participation". Practically, this allows for mixed-language brainstorming before target-language output, keeping student identity intact.

To add vibrancy to this evolving classroom, we look toward the digital window. **Ju Seong Lee** connects the Korean *aideul* (children) to IDLE (Informal Digital Learning of English). He suggests that "digital activity doesn't have to be seen as competing with education; it can be viewed as a potential resource for it." A teacher might incorporate a vlog clip or have students research a hobby online in English, bridging the gap between the classroom and the authentic English they encounter on their smartphones. This shift in perspective is bolstered by **Hyun-Sook Kang**, who moves us from the role of "tour guide" to "facilitator." She creates a "heuristic approach" where the teacher starts with questions to see where students are, guiding them through methodology options rather than prescribing a single itinerary.

The final layer is the "human glow" of compassion. **Kilryoung Lee** addresses the silence of Korean classrooms, noting many learners are "cautious about speaking up and are strongly influenced by face-saving concerns". He argues "compassion can be a useful framework for supporting learners as they navigate anxiety, fear of mistakes, and classroom silence". This strategy leads to the "Absolute Positive Regard" championed by **Curtis Kelly**, who reminds us "adding meaning is not just being 'nice,' adding fun is not just having 'fun.' Both enhance learning". Kelly's application is profound: instead of shouting at a sleeping student, we quietly check their well-being, releasing the dopamine necessary for deep learning.

Finally, **David D. Perrodin** grounds the work in "human dignity". His "compassion-centered criticality" reminds us that teaching must be "a practice that cultivates voice, dignity, ethical awareness, and genuine human connection". This allows for high standards without humiliation and critical awareness without cynicism.

By the time we have integrated the research of these nine scholars, our "static" classroom has been completely transformed. It is no longer a place of rote repetition but a multi-dimensional space where we use our freedom to act with intention. As we look forward to the KOTESOL International Conference, we aren't just attending a series of talks; we are joining a collective of artists ready to rethink the possible. The canvas is prepped, the colors are ready, and the brushes are in our hands.

President's Message

Striding into Spring with KOTESOL!

By Dr. Lindsay N. Herron KOTESOL President

It's hard to believe we're already a quarter into the century, but KOTESOL is facing the coming year with a great sense of enthusiasm and purpose. It's the Year of the Fire Horse, after all – a time of radiant energy, dynamic intentions, and bold decisions. What are your personal and professional goals for the year? Whether you are hoping to spark new pedagogical insights or build warm and lasting connections, the upcoming months are packed with opportunities to keep your momentum high. From local chapter workshops to our much-anticipated national events, KOTESOL is here to support your ambition!

As you embark on your personal and professional journey this year, don't miss the 33rd Korea TESOL International Conference. KOTESOL 2026 promises to be an outstanding chance to connect, collaborate, and collect inspiration! The theme, "Criticality, Innovation, and Compassion: Rethinking Language Education in Times of Change" is particularly apropos in today's volatile global climate, focusing on our evolving roles as educators and how we can embrace a compassionate, critical approach to the future in the face of seemingly inescapable, endemic intolerance and insularity.

Our invited speakers represent a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, including practitioners and researchers both familiar and new. Conference participants can look forward to sessions by Thomas S. C. Farrell, known for his work in reflective practice, in addition to being the founder of our annual Reflective Language Teacher Award and a past recipient of the KOTESOL Patron Award; Nathanael Rudolph, another familiar face, whose plenary will explore belonging in language education; Curtis Kelly, whose dynamic presentations on neuroscience in ELT have graced many a KOTESOL conference; Hyun-Sook Kang, who will talk about language teacher agency; Kilryoung Lee, who will be speaking on compassion and who might be familiar from his leadership in our partner organizations ALAK and AsiaTEFL; Ju Seong Lee, a top-notch researcher based in Hong Kong, who will present on informal digital learning of English and who also has served as KOTESOL's Research Committee chair; Michael Rabbidge, speaking on translanguaging and identity, who might be familiar to KOTESOL regulars for his outstanding sessions at past KOTESOL conferences; Kyungja Ahn, the current president of ALAK, who will discuss building connections between theory and practice in teacher education; David Perrodin, coming to us from Thailand to present on critical pedagogies of care; and more.

In addition, we expect more than two hundred sessions over the course of the weekend, and lifetime member Kara Mac Donald is once again sponsoring a travel grant for up to two presenters with demonstrated financial need, further ensuring a diverse range of perspectives and insights.

On Saturday evening at the conference, the KOTESOL Membership Committee is once again hosting a ticketed social event where all KOTESOL members – even those not attending the conference – can connect, catch up, and decompress. As in years past, this event will feature liberal libations and delicious culinary creations by Spoon Seoul. Whether your primary purpose is to develop yourself as an educator or researcher or to cultivate your social circles, this year's conference is sure to be an impressive, inspiring, and inclusive event! With both in-person and online offerings, it definitely will be an amazing opportunity for personal connections and professional growth.

Beyond the international conference, though, KOTESOL offers a wealth of opportunities to grow professionally throughout the year. Whether you'd like to attend more professional development events or want to bolster your resume by presenting and publishing your work, KOTESOL is here to support your goals! Many of our regional chapters host monthly workshops that serve as the perfect venue to connect with peers, explore fresh ideas, or test out a new presentation. For those interested in delving into specific topics, our special interest groups (SIGs) offer a fantastic way to share your passions with like-minded educators. Looking to expand beyond KOTESOL? Take advantage of our reciprocal conference discounts with partner organizations such as JALT (Japan). You can also apply for a travel or conference grant to represent us abroad. Our recent partnership with the Korean Association of English for Specific Purposes (KAESP) – and a few other partnerships currently in the works – also offers exciting new avenues for international networking and learning.

Is this the year you expand your research presence? KOTESOL's Research Committee offers two annual grants (up to 250,000 won and 750,000 won, respectively) to fund your inquiry projects. We also invite you to share your expertise through our diverse publications: Scribes Square, which comprises informal blog posts; *The English Connection*, which features magazine-style articles; the *KOTESOL Proceedings*, which compiles articles based on our international conference sessions; or *Korea TESOL Journal*, our research journal.

What will 2026 bring for you? Will it be a year of expansive growth and radical transformation? Will you pursue new ambitions or finally fulfill old dreams? Wherever your path takes you, I hope KOTESOL can help you on your way, and I hope to see you at a KOTESOL event soon!

Updates on the 2026 KOTESOL International Conference

By Dr. Meerbek Kudaibergenov, Chair, Korea TESOL International Conference 2026

As we move steadily closer to the 33rd Korea TESOL International Conference, "Criticality, Innovation, and Compassion: Rethinking Language Education in Times of Change," I am delighted to share some exciting updates and a glimpse behind the scenes of what has already become a truly collective effort.

First, the biggest milestone: Submissions are now officially closed. The response from the international ELT community has been nothing short of inspiring. We received over 480 submissions from around the world (i.e., South Korea, Japan, Mexico, Armenia, Taiwan, USA, Indonesia, India, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Hong Kong, Philippines, Canada, New Zealand, Spain, Bangladesh, United Kingdom, Pakistan, Turkey, UAE, South Africa, and Greece), representing a great diversity of contexts, perspectives, and methodological approaches from workshops to research presentations, from poster sessions to thought-provoking panel discussions. KOTESOL is certainly shaping up for an outstanding academic program!

All submissions are currently entering a double-blind vetting process, carried out with great care by our vetters. We know how much time, thought, and passion goes into preparing a proposal, and we are committed to ensuring a fair and thorough review process. Submitters will be notified of the outcomes on March 1, 2026. While the waiting period can be nerve-wracking, we are confident that the resulting program will reflect the conference theme in meaningful and dynamic ways.

In the meantime, we are happy to share our lineup of invited speakers that includes Thomas Farrell (Brock University, Canada), whose work on reflective practice continues to shape language teacher education worldwide, and Nathanael Rudolph (Kindai University, Japan), whose research on language, identity, and criticality challenges us to rethink our roles and contexts. The lineup also features seven outstanding speakers – Curtis Kelly (Kansai University), Hyun-Sook Kang (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA), Kilryoung Lee (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea), Ju Seong Lee (Education University of Hong Kong), Michael Rabbidge (University of Waikato, New Zealand), Kyungja Ahn (Seoul National University of Education, Korea), and David Perrodin (Mahidol University, Thailand) – whose expertise will offer participants opportunities for learning, dialogue, and inspiration.

Behind the scenes, the Organizing Committee is working at full speed and with a lot of heart to make sure that the conference experience is both academically enriching and personally enjoyable. Our Publicity Team has been especially busy preparing a series of engaging and carefully timed social media posts. These include visually striking posters highlighting our speakers, short videos introducing members of the organizing team, and regular updates designed to keep our community informed and excited as the conference approaches. So keep an eye on our social media channels; there is plenty to look forward to. Meanwhile, Guest Services is tackling one of the most practical (and appreciated!) aspects of the conference: food. Yes, we are happy to confirm that lunches will be served to pre-registered attendees. The team is working hard to design a menu that is distinctly Korean in style while also being healthy and accommodating. Good food, after all, is an essential part of good conversations and productive conference days.

Of course, these are just a few highlights. Every team – from logistics to technology, from registration to HR – has a full plate at the moment. While it is not possible to include updates from everyone in a single message, please know that an enormous amount of thoughtful planning and collaboration is happening across the board.

We are also giving special attention to the cultural dimensions of the conference. Academic exchange is at its best when it is complemented by opportunities to engage with local culture, and we are eager to offer memorable experiences in this regard. For the opening ceremony, I am currently in discussions with a troupe of taekwondo artists whose performances I have witnessed multiple times – each time with genuine awe. Their energy, precision, and artistry would make for a powerful and uniquely Korean opening to our conference, and we are hopeful that we can welcome them to the stage. In addition, pre-conference cultural activities are in the works. The KOTESOL president is leading the planning of a pre-conference cultural trip, offering participants a chance to explore, connect, and experience Korea beyond the conference venue.

As preparations continue at this pace, it has become clear that the scale of this year's conference will be substantial. With that in mind, we warmly invite anyone who wishes to contribute to the conference's success to consider joining us as a volunteer. We welcome both student volunteers and individuals with specific expertise, such as photography, videography, editing, or event support. Volunteering is not only a meaningful way to give back to the professional community but also a wonderful opportunity to connect with colleagues from around the world.

Thank you, and we look forward to sharing more updates with you very soon.

Meerbek Kudaibergenov *serves KOTESOL as the chair of the 33rd Korea TESOL International Conference and is a regional editor for the* Journal of International Students*. Dr. Kudaibergenov is an assistant professor at Seoul National University of Science and Technology (SeoulTech) in Seoul. His research focuses on transnational teacher identity, legitimacy, and international student experiences.*

2026 KOREA TESOL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Criticality, Innovation, Compassion: Rethinking Language Education in Times of Change

#KOTESOL2026

Introducing our invited speakers!

Plenary Speakers

THOMAS FARRELL
Professor of Applied Linguistics, Brock University, Ontario, Canada

NATHANAEL RUDOLPH
Professor of Sociolinguistics, Kindai University, Higashiosaka, Japan

Featured Speakers

CURTIS HART KELLY
Professor Emeritus, Kansai University, Osaka, Japan

HYUN-SOOK KANG
Associate Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

KILRYOUNG LEE
Professor, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea

JU SEONG LEE
Associate Professor, Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

MICHAEL RABBIDGE
Senior Lecturer, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

KYUNGJA AHN
Professor, Seoul National University of Education, Seoul, Korea

DAVID D. PERRODIN
Foreign Expert, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

More Information

May 16-17, 2026

https://koreatesol.org/ic2026

Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul, South Korea

KOREA TESOL
KOTESOL
대한영어교육학회

Focusing on Teacher Well-Being and Reframing It Through Reflective Practice

Professor Thomas S. C. Farrell, Brock University, Canada

Thomas Farrell is a professor of applied linguistics at Brock University in Canada. He is one of the foremost authorities on reflective practice and reflective inquiry, with over 40 related books (and counting) and a full schedule of conference plenaries worldwide. At KOTESOL 2026, Prof. Farrell will be delivering the Saturday plenary session, entitled "Ten Principles of Effective Teaching for Teacher Well-Being." In his earlier years, he spent almost two decades teaching EFL in Seoul, and has now spent more than two decades at Brock University in Canada. Prof. Farrell has been named to the World's Top 2% Scientists Citation Index by Stanford University for 2025 and for his career, as well. After his return from a conference in Hawaii, Prof. Farrell arranged time to do the following interview for The English Connection. — Ed.

***The English Connection* (TEC)**: To begin, could you briefly share about what led you to focus your plenary on teacher well-being? What felt most important about addressing this topic?

Prof. Farrell: A "Teacher of the Year" one year ago was interviewed about why she left the profession one year after getting that award:

> "Why did you resign?"
>
> "I was constantly exhausted, overwhelmed, and left feeling unappreciated. Even with strong classroom management, student behavior was unmanageable, and the pay was simply too low."

You may point out correctly that this is an example of an elementary school teacher in the US. However, recently with my own research working with wonderful ESL teachers in Ontario, I found the same pattern for ESL teachers quitting the profession: exhaustion, feeling overwhelmed as well as unappreciated together with low motivated students (Farrell, 2025).

Three of the five ESL teachers I worked with quit teaching after their second year, third year, and fifth year (that is 60%). I was so disappointed as all these teachers were really excellent, really loved teaching. As Candice noted at the end of her fifth year, she felt "burnt out and demotivated" from all her "running around," always having to look for more work so that she could survive, given the "low salary we are all paid." Candice

▲ ***Thomas Farrell, 5th-degree black belt, taekwondo.***

continued, "Teaching is a difficult career. It demands your time, attention, patience, and dedication." So, she finally decided at the end of her fifth year that she had had enough, and it seems that a combination of several factors, including poor salary, lack of support, overwork in terms of hours, minimum possibilities of growth within the profession, and the value society places on an ESL teacher's work, all led her to quit the profession for her future well-being.

I was so disappointed because I worked so closely with these excellent teachers. I realized after this experience that I should focus more on teacher well-being and try to reframe it through reflective practice, and for this plenary, through the idea of "effective teaching" so that ESL/EFL teachers can survive and thrive.

TEC: In your view, how are "effective teaching" and "teacher well-being" connected? Can one really exist without the other?

Prof. Farrell: Effective teaching cannot be reduced to a technique; it requires self-knowledge through self-reflection. Effective TESOL teaching requires aligning philosophy, beliefs, theory, principles, and classroom practices to ensure coherence and confidence. Effective teaching and teacher well-being are deeply connected. Teachers who feel well tend to be more effective teachers, and effective teaching enhances well-being. It's a mutually reinforcing relationship.

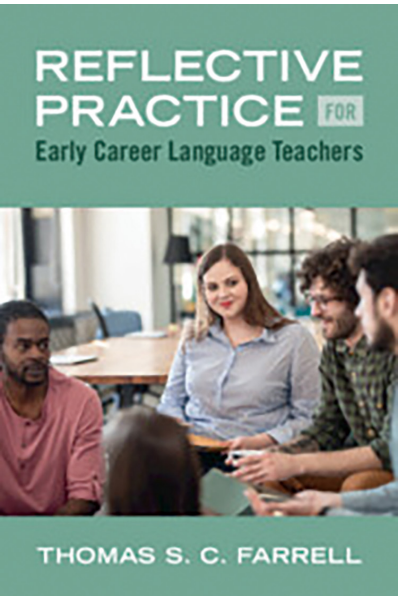
TEC: Reflection has been central to your work for many years. How can reflection support teachers rather than adding to their workload?

Prof. Farrell: First of all, I do not consider teacher well-being to be an add-on. It really emerges through *systematic, sustained reflection on practice*. Indeed, recent TESOL well-being research echoes this by emphasizing agency, meaning-making, and ecological awareness, aligning closely with reflective practice principles and effective teaching. Regarding reflection as an add-on as well is the same as telling a medical

doctor that reading medical journals about medical issues and the latest in drug development is a useless add-on to their work, as they should just attend to patients, just as we should just teach English.

Reflection is not a method, it is a way of life in that every teacher should be aware of who they are, what they know, what they do, how they do it, why they do it, and what experiences have shaped their thinking up to their present moment in a classroom. The results of engaging in such reflective practice may mean an affirmation of current practices or making changes, but these changes will not be based on impulse, tradition, or the like; they will emerge as a result of analysis of concrete evidence. By making systematic reflections on teaching that produce concrete evidence of what teachers do, they can become free from making too many impulsive decisions about what to teach, when to teach and why to teach it.

Teachers can thus move beyond designing routine activities for their students to complete just because they have always done this, as well as move on from making routine decisions in their classrooms. The reason is that reflective practice enables teachers to act in a more deliberate and intentional manner because they will use the information/data gathered from their systematic reflections to make more informed decisions (rather than routine decisions) about what to do, thus creating better opportunities for their students to learn in their classes.



▲ *Farrell's recent book by Cambridge University Press.*

TEC: Of the 10 principles you'll introduce at the conference, is there one that tends to resonate with teachers across very different contexts? What do you hear from teachers internationally?

Prof. Farrell: I will not highlight any one principle (and I don't want to give them away just yet!) because all 10 are interrelated and overlap in many ways. But to cite my book pictured here (Farrell, 2025), all teachers noted that reflection and especially the individual tools that were used such as dialogue, writing, and/or classroom observations had a cathartic effect on each of them and that such reflections also enhanced their well-being. I hope that the 10 principles that I outline in my plenary can expand teachers' level of awareness and self-reflections and thus enhance their overall well-being.

Teachers who feel well tend to be more effective teachers, and effective teaching enhances well-being. It's a mutually reinforcing relationship.

...they are the best that they can be in providing as many opportunities for their students to learn as they can.

TEC: Many teachers around the world feel caught between their teaching ideals and institutional demands; what advice would you offer for sustaining well-being in that tension?

Prof. Farrell: Straight up, I believe that when teachers in a school or institute engage in reflective practice, such reflections can lead to a happier, healthier workplace. This is because the very act of teaching itself involves practices that entail that teachers think before they teach (even for a short time), on the spot while teaching (especially if something goes wrong), and after teaching (even if only on the way home in the bus/subway). Those teachers who engage in more detailed reflections that are evidence based will find their work more rewarding, as they will see that they are the best that they can be in providing as many opportunities for their students to learn as they can.

Engaging in reflective practice will also help teachers to participate in the realities of education and related social conditions in which they are working in – in this case, Korea. They (teachers who may be from Korea or not from Korea) can realize that they may not be able to solve everything (and that is okay), but they will have a good sense of issues that affect their classroom and their own beliefs and practices about these issues. In this manner, each teacher will be able to access their own way forward within any school or institution and deal with whatever tensions that exist, or that they may sense, without having an inverse impact on their overall well-being. I characterize this as reframing teacher well-being through reflective practice.

TEC: Finally, what do you hope participants will take away from your plenary at the 2026 KOTESOL International Conference?

Prof. Farrell: These days it seems that the world is in a bit of turmoil and this includes education and language teaching as we try to traverse the new landscape of AI in all our lives. Language teachers need the psychological equivalent of a black belt in taekwondo (Yes, as you see in the photo, I had a mustache at that time in Korea) for their own well-being in order to be able to cope with all the challenges they face throughout their teaching careers – in Korea or elsewhere.

I found the art of taekwondo (I am a 5th-degree black belt) very relaxing as it kept me alert when I was teaching in Korea, and although I am much older, I still try to practice some of the moves as often as I can, as I feel optimistic about life after each session. I hope that people who attend my plenary will feel the same: relaxed and optimistic about their futures as they enact some or all of the 10 principles in their professional lives.

TEC: Thank you for this interview, Prof. Farrell. We look forward to learning more about the 10 principles for effective teaching and teacher well-being, and about reflective practice in general, at the international conference.

Interviewed by Meerbek Kudaibergenov.

"'Being, Becoming, and Belonging' Relates to My Particular Way of Seeing 'Identity' and 'Interaction'"

Professor Nathanael Rudolph, Kindai University, Japan

Nathanael Rudolph is a professor of sociolinguistics and language education at Kindai University in Higashiosaka, Japan. He received his PhD at the University of Maryland at College Park (USA). He is an editor on several well-known journals and co-author of the soon-to-be-published Transcending Language Education in Japan: Borderland Accounts of Being, Becoming, and Belonging *(Bloomsbury). At KOTESOL 2026, Prof. Rudolph will be giving three presentations: His plenary session titled* Transdisciplinary, Community-Based Approaches to Being, Becoming, and Belonging in Language Education: (Re-)envisioning Theory, Research, and Teaching. *He will also be presenting an invited second session and is participating in a panel discussion on criticality.* The English Connection *was fortunate to be able to interview Prof. Rudolph for this issue. — Ed.*

The English Connection **(TEC)**: Thank you for this interview. Let's begin with your plenary session. Your talk uses the ideas of being, becoming, and belonging. In simple terms, how do these ideas help us understand language education?

Prof. Rudolph: First of all, thank you for this opportunity!

For me, using the expression "being, becoming, and belonging" relates to my particular way of seeing "identity" and "interaction." My view is that people dynamically *negotiate* identity and community membership *in interaction* (a) discursively with others, (b) with the "material" world, and (c) with the "spiritual/supernatural." I know this sounds abstract, so here is a snapshot that includes (a), (b), and (c):

I'm checking into a hotel in northern Japan, about six hours by train from where I live (in Hyogo Prefecture). The employee asks me for my passport in English, and I tell her in Japanese that I have my foreign resident card. She sees it and tells me she's from Hyogo. She switches into a local dialect from the area, and we swap stories and laugh. She notes that I live in Nishinomiya City where the local pro baseball team, the Hanshin Tigers, plays. I tell her my older daughter and I are fans. She is, too! I tell her that my daughter has just attended her *seijinshiki* (Coming of Age Day ceremony) at Koshien Stadium, where the Tigers play. She tells me that she did the same thing three years ago, and that she hasn't been able to visit since around that time. She is planning to go home to see her grandfather, however, who is ill. I tell her that I will be praying for her grandfather and her whole family. I finish filling out the check-in documents online in Japanese, say goodbye, head up to my room in the elevator, and ask God to bless and comfort "Airi," her grandfather, and her whole family.

The ongoing negotiation of being, becoming, and belonging may involve affirming, perpetuating, and patrolling, as well as problematizing, challenging, and transcending what I would call "borders" of "language," "culture," "identity," "place," "community," and "space." There can be social, financial, educational, and physical consequences (for example), positive and/or negative, resulting from this negotiation. In my example, I challenged how "Airi" positioned me (as a foreign tourist/businessperson), and I asserted the fact that Japan is my home, and I am an invested community member in Nishinomiya, Hyogo, along with my family. I prayed for "Airi" and her family, believing, with experience, that there is real value in doing so. This snapshot is very positive. Interaction, though, can be inscribed with a great deal of tension.

With reference to language education: Big picture-wise, I feel thinking about negotiated being, becoming, and belonging in this way sheds light on how people negotiate identity and community membership in diverse and complex ways (linguistically, culturally, ethnically, socioeconomically, educationally, religiously, politically, etc.). It also helps me apprehend the fact that language education (including theory, research, policy, curriculum, materials development, teaching, assessment, and hiring practices) is a battlefield, where different ways of "seeing" – of knowing, being, and doing – are competing and (potentially) in conflict. And, notably, language education both shapes and is shaped by the sociohistorical context in which it is situated. Speaking of teaching, no one can say "I just teach English." We are all teaching ways of knowing, being, and doing, while challenging others. If you're based in the Republic of Korea, this includes notions of "(South) Koreanness" and "membership in (South) Korean society" as well.

TEC: Let's talk about another one of the key words in your plenary title: *community-based*. What does community-based language teaching look like in everyday teaching practice?

Prof. Rudolph: Community-based language teaching is grounded in the types of questions I have just described. It is rooted in sociohistorical context. Through this lens, teachers would seek to listen, share, reflect, and (un-)learn, in dialogue with their students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. They would aim to learn and grow as members of the communities in which they, their students, and other stakeholders live.

TEC: Another expression that you use is *transdisciplinary*. When you say "transdisciplinary," what does that mean for teachers who may be hearing this term for the first time?

▲ ***Nathanael and research friends in the Ryukyu Islands.***

Prof. Rudolph: Speaking of applied linguistics, Pennycook (2018) noted that teacher-scholars engage with questions/issues/realities that require transcending areas of study (or "fields" and corresponding bodies of "literature"). Pennycook's work reminds us that the questions we are seeking to address when attending to, for example, identity, community membership, and injustice, require drawing on resources and participating in professional activities and spaces that transcend professions, and of course, academia itself. Community-based approaches to theory, research, and teaching include the need to pursue learning in a transdisciplinary fashion.

Here is a small, hypothetical example related to university-level hiring practices in "South Korea," to underscore the value of this approach:

"Selena" (a female teacher from Canada) works in a university where "native-speaker teachers" from specific countries are employed on part- and full-time contracts. The majority of these teachers are "white, Western, and male." These teachers are largely kept separate from their South Korean counterparts, who are part- and full-time. The South Korean teachers comprise the majority of faculty at the university. Only South Korean professors have a path to tenure. Each one of these faculty members has a unique story. There is additionally one teacher from Japan, and one from Kazakhstan, who have been put in the "native-speaker teacher" section of the building. All teachers are expected to use English conversation materials produced in England. Selena wants to know more about what may be happening, and why.

Selena is aware, that, in the literature associated with English language teaching and applied linguistics (with a focus on South Korea), scholars emphasize how "native speakerism" privileges "white, Western" ways of knowing, being, and doing, while simultaneously marginalizing alternate ones. This affects hiring practices (e.g., who is hired, under what conditions, what roles they are supposed to play). This certainly seems to be part of but not the whole story for Selena.

Selena tries to speak informally with "international" colleagues, and then interview them, to hear their stories. Some share, some decline, and two are suspicious of what she is doing and why. They warn her not to "cause trouble." She asks to interview a few Korean faculty members, including the chair of the program. Some speak of the necessary, symbiotic relationship between "us Koreans" and "the native speakers," who have different values and roles on campus. The chair mentions the fact that "the Japanese and Kazakh teachers went to university in South Korea and are basically native-like in English."

Following these interviews, Selena ponders a few questions: How do I account for the fact that the majority of faculty are South Korean, and why is this the case? Who are these so-called "native speaker teachers," and what are their stories? How is their "value" (and therefore their corresponding roles) imagined? How do I better understand the paths my Japanese and Kazakh colleagues followed to be where they are, and the challenges they have had and continue to face? Is the limiting of who is "present" in the faculty and who is "missing" more than an ideological one in education? Is it, for example, a legal, visa-related issue?

Selena reads legal documents about visa provision, and documents related to migration. She reads about language policy on a national level in South Korea and guidelines for language education. She reads about the origin and nature of her program. This leads her to speak with other people on and beyond her campus. When presenting at KOTESOL's Seoul Chapter, she meets another individual who is talking about the lived experiences of university-level English language educators from the Philippines. They chat for hours at a local coffee shop and promise to stay in touch. Walking home, Selena thinks to herself: What might transformational change in my workplace look like, and elsewhere? She resolves to continue listening, sharing, reflecting and learning, and perhaps write a paper!

TEC: Looking back on your own teaching, can you recall a moment when learning clearly went beyond the classroom for your students (and for yourself)?

Prof. Rudolph: This happens all the time. One recent example came from a conversation class I was teaching, related to identity and community membership in (and transcending) Japan. I had created a lesson that highlighted the lives of three women of Korean ancestry working in Tsuruhashi, a neighborhood near my university. As many readers may know, people of Korean ancestry have been migrating (by choice and by force) to the area since before the colonial period (from time immemorial, actually). The lesson discussed history and the three women's identities and lived experiences. At the end of the class, one student approached me and told me she was *zainichi* (a person of Korean ancestry with roots in the colonial period, who is not naturalized). She was excited to feel "seen" and wanted to talk about moving to Korea and creating cosmetics.

In another class, on a similar topic, a student came up to me after class, crying. She said it was the first time she had heard someone discuss her (invisible) reality. She had attended elementary and junior high schools politically affiliated with North Korea, and a South Korea-related high school. She shared more about her lived experiences in a paper, and eventually wrote a book chapter for an edited volume I co-edited! Now, she is in the north of Japan in graduate school, studying to be a researcher and teacher. I learned an incredible amount from both of these students, and from the reading I was prompted to do by our interactions.

▲ ***Nathanael with his daughters in Seoul.***

TEC: KOTESOL brings together teachers from many backgrounds and teaching contexts. Based on your own experiences, what helps a professional community like KOTESOL become a place where teachers genuinely feel a sense of belonging, not just professional networking?

Prof. Rudolph: This is a great question and deserves a longer and better answer than I can give here!

Ideally, an association like KOTESOL, and the events it sponsors, should be spaces for people of diverse backgrounds to come together to listen, share, reflect, and (un-)learn; to invest in others and be invested in in an "iron sharpening iron" fashion, with the goal in mind of better serving our students and the communities wherein they and we live, work, and study. If this is not happening in part or wholly, how might everyone from association and event leadership to members and attendees play a role in calling this out and working to cultivate such spaces? The upcoming international conference seems like one good, recent attempt at this in practice.

Thank you again, and I wish readers all the best!

TEC: And thank you, Prof. Rudolph. We are looking forward to your sessions at KOTESOL 2026!

Interviewed by Meerbek Kudaibergenov.

"Just Knowing Something Is Only Half of Learning"

Professor Curtis Kelly, Kansai University

If you are a regular reader of The English Connection*, "Curtis Kelly" is a familiar name to you. He is the author of our popular The Brain Connection column. And if you are a regular participant in KOTESOL conferences, he may also be a familiar face. Prof. Kelly is a prolific presenter as well as the author of myriad books. He is the founder of the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG and an editor for the* MindBrainEd Think Tanks*. At KOTESOL 2026, Prof. Kelly will present a featured session titled "How Neuroscience Shows Us That Tasks Are Mandatory, Not Optional" and an invited second session: "Putting Neuroscience to Work in Methods and Materials."* The English Connection *recently connected with Prof. Kelly to query him on a wide range of topics. — Ed.*

***The English Connection* (TEC)**: Thank you for so enthusiastically agreeing to do this interview for TEC. Let's begin with a question about your expat teaching career: You spent a long – and brilliant, I might add – career in ELT in Japan. What lured you to that culture and what kept you there for so many years?

Prof. Kelly: I came to Japan at age 23 for two reasons that I think other expats might share: One was to master Japanese after little success in my US college classes; the other was my love of a particular Japanese woman, although that turned out to be a dead end. Nonetheless, once I started living in Japan, I found a world of difference that in the end, freed me from my own cultural prison. As Edward T. Hall noted, we can't really see the invisible walls of our culture encircling us until another culture makes us bump into them. After 47 years though, I was still weak at Japanese and still bumping. I did find true love though.

TEC: Well, that's probably the most important. Your bios, such as the one you provide in *The English Connection*, often contain "His life mission is to relieve the suffering of the classroom." What produced that mission? And looking back on your career, in what ways would you say you have fulfilled your mission?

Prof. Kelly: I saw far too many students who had trouble learning English fall into self-doubt and misery. But it wasn't their fault. Their teachers tended to be the kind of people who excelled at learning languages and also tended to teach in boring and brain-incompatible ways, such as translation and rote memorization. I was not like that. I was terribly poor at learning languages and so had sympathy for students like me.

One high school boy in particular stands out in my memory. I was observing a class in a nationally honored high school, taught by a particularly good Japanese teacher. The teacher was asking fast questions and having his students give fast answers. This boy was obviously lost on what was going on, and suffering. He just put his head face down in his arms on his desk, and stayed that way for the whole class. To me, he was a model of what was happening to so many students, including some of my own, and that memory is like a statue of commemoration.

To relieve the suffering, I have made three things in my teaching and work paramount. The first is *personalization*. In the later teens and early twenties, our learners need to, and love to, share themselves in risk-free ways. For example, instead of the usual self-introductions in the first class, I have students interview each other, fill out a page of biographical information, experiences, and the desires of their interviewee (as well as drawing a horrid headshot), and I collect those pages to print up as a class album. I use that kind of personalization in my textbooks as well. *Significant Scribbles* (Pearson) is based on students keeping diaries, and the *Writing from Within* series (Cambridge) has learners share about meaningful experiences and interests.

The second way to relieve suffering is a devotion to *meaning and fun* in my classes and materials. Adding meaning is not just being "nice," adding fun is not just having "fun." Both enhance learning. The feeling of reward comes from dopamine release, which also causes neurons to form stronger connections, in other words, producing deeper learning. That is why we love stories, and why play – our built-in way of learning – is fun. We feel good as a result, the very thing our brains are built to remember.

To achieve that end, for meaning, I tell heart-warming stories and show touching YouTube videos. For fun, I developed a TBLT book, *The Snoop Detective School: Interactive Tasks for English Learners*. After eight years of working on it, Yuichi Suzuki and I just published it with Abax in Japan (Abax.co.jp), and we are so proud of having made "fun" a priority. Student pairs solve crimes by comparing different sets of pictures of a crime scene, or in other words, doing an information gap. Total fun. And they love it. Nothing I've ever done in class has made me happier as well. See if you can get a copy.

The third way to relieve suffering is simple: *Absolute Positive Regard*, a principle from the great psychologist Carl Rogers, that one must apply to every learner, no matter how pierced or ill-behaved. I don't say "Wake up!" to a sleeping student. Instead, I

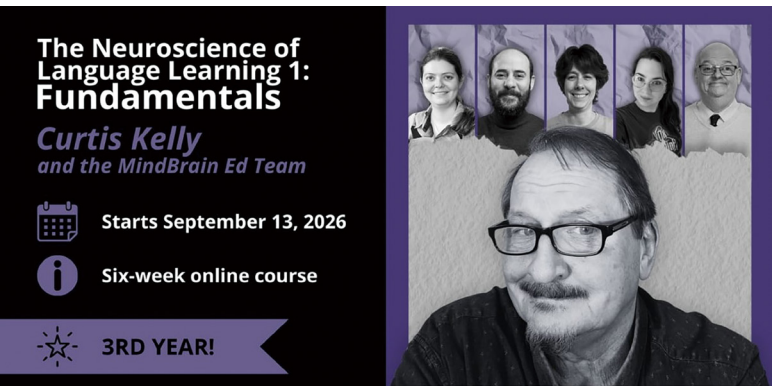
quietly ask them if they are okay, and if they would like to go out to get a drink of water or rest in my office.

TEC: Continuing with a look at your biosketch in *The English Connection* – and by the way, the TEC staff and KOTESOL are quite grateful for The Brain Connection column that you pen there – the bio reads that you have "written 35 books, over 100 articles…" My question is where do you find the time to do so much writing and what topics have you most focused on? I do remember the textbooks that you mentioned earlier.

Prof. Kelly: Well, I taught in Japan for 47 years! That's enough time. And I liked making materials for my own classes, many of which ended up as textbooks. As for the articles, most are in the free magazine we produce, the *MindBrainEd Think Tanks* (please subscribe), and in my quarterly column in this fine magazine! But I suppose the real reason is that I am pretty sure I have ADHD. That drives me into numerous projects that I rarely do in a rigorous way. It is hard to call much of my work particularly "scholarly," but I see that as an advantage really.

TEC: That bio goes on to say, "…and given over 500 presentations" – no easy accomplishment. This reminds me of presentations that you did for KOTESOL at our 2017 National Conference in cooperation with your FAB conferences on "neuroELT." Oh, and also your hilarious pecha kucha on you being a drug dealer (with Charles Brown in shades standing by as your bodyguard). What were you pushing, and whatever happened to the FABulous FAB conferences?

Prof. Kelly: Yes, that pecha kucha was particularly fun, and you can see it on YouTube if you search "Curtis Kelly I Deal Drugs." That shows my devotion to fun, and that you can still remember it proves that fun truly *is* a factor of learning. I'll bet you don't remember the other two presentations I did that year! In fact, that pecha kucha was probably the hardest speech I ever did. I decided it should not be boring, but still deliver important knowledge – how dopamine works – and it took me weeks to put that little presentation together. The pecha kucha format is so hard.



As for the FABs, First Annual Brain Days 1–12 (brain science changes so quickly that each was a "first"), I think the best one we ever did was here in Korea, using Robert Murphy's brilliant participant-centered structure. Everyone brought their "burning questions" to share and solve. That was maybe the last "FAB," but I have been involved in setting up many other similar brain conferences afterwards for the JALT BRAIN SIG and other organizations. I even mimicked that Seoul-originated participant-centered conference model in an Oregon TESOL conference in 2023.

TEC: Let's now move on from the past to the present. Since you are no longer in the classroom, what ELT-related matters do you most focus on? Are you still so actively giving presentations?

Prof. Kelly: Alas, I now live in San Diego, where my main job is driving my two teen girls around. I miss my people in Japan and Korea so much. That is why I'm coming to KOTESOL this year. I still edit the *Think Tanks*, present whenever I can, and now I have rich discussions with English teachers around the world in the two online courses we have created, *The Neuroscience of Language Learning 1 and 2*.

I guess I have a soft spot for the people who do so much for others for so little or nothing…

These are hosted by the International Teacher Development Institute (iTDi.pro) and the courses are pretty much done as volunteer work; participants pay only what they can. Visit the site and look at our free sample module on the Social Brain. I guarantee simplicity, fun, and probably getting teary-eyed from the heartwarming YouTube interludes. KOTESOL members have a special discount code.

TEC: And to move a bit into the future, your featured talk at KOTESOL 2026 is titled "How Neuroscience Shows Us That Tasks Are Mandatory, Not Optional." Could you give us a sneak preview of what it will delve into?

Prof. Kelly: Neuroscience shows us that just *knowing* something is only half of learning. It is extremely difficult for the brain to take knowledge and turn it into goals and actions, a process known as cognitive control. In other words, *doing* is the other half, one we have undervalued. After looking at this area of neuroscience, I think your folks will realize that tasks and TBLT, as well as extensive reading, must be seen as more than just "alternatives." Cognitive control and all it entails also suggests that we develop whole new ways to measure English proficiency, including real-time abilities, responding, language creativity, and other skills.

TEC: I'm wondering what might be on your ELT-neuroscience bucket list. And also, on your personal bucket list.

Prof. Kelly: To come here sometimes. Please make me a KOTESOL elder.

TEC: We can work on that! You've always told us that you're fond of KOTESOL even though you were located in Japan. Why is that?

Prof. Kelly: I am always so impressed by the leadership and massive cooperation in KOTESOL. It awes me, and I consider it, along with JALT, one of the premier teaching organizations in the world. Its greatest strength is that it honors every single teacher and learner instead of being distorted by academic hierarchy into something aristocratic. (Whew! What a mouthful.)

I guess I have a soft spot for the people who do so much for others for so little or nothing – as all your people running this organization and the conference. I consider them "angels."

TEC: So nice of you to say. In concluding this interview, do you have any final words for our readership?

Prof. Kelly: Yes.
Be a people maker, not a language teacher.
Focus on the learner experience.
Forget yourself (meaning that skipping the "meaningful" in a class to get to the end of the textbook chapter is the wrong way to go).
Help your learners connect to each other.
Honor the social brain.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

"Language Education Will Evolve to Reflect an Increasingly Multipolar World"

Professor Hyun-Sook Kang, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Hyun-Sook Kang is a professor of educational policy, organization, and leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, specializing in educational linguistics and global education. After earning her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, she has focused her research on language ideologies, student agency, and identity within global mobility. Beyond the classroom, she serves on several international editorial boards, advancing scholarly dialogue in applied linguistics and qualitative research. At KOTESOL 2026, Professor Kang will deliver a featured session titled "Language Teacher Agency in the Ecosystems of Internationalized Higher Education." She recently met with The English Connection *to share her latest insights. — Ed.*

***The English Connection* (TEC)**: Professor Kang, thank you for speaking with KOTESOL's *The English Connection* magazine. Could you start by sharing some of your back story? Specifically, what were the key chapters of your life and career before you settled into your current position in Illinois?

Prof. Kang: I was born and grew up in Busan. I stayed there until I finished my undergrad degree in English. During college at the height of globalization and English language education, I took advantage of study abroad opportunities in Canada and the UK. After college, I moved to North America to pursue my graduate studies: a master's in linguistics in Canada and a PhD in educational linguistics in the US.

TEC: Much of your research examines language ideology in contexts of global mobility. What initially drew you to this area of inquiry?

Prof. Kang: This topic resonates with my lived experience learning and using English as an additional language and working with teachers and researchers.

TEC: Your featured session at KOTESOL 2026 is entitled "Language Teacher Agency in the Ecosystems of Internationalized Higher Education." Can you give us a glimpse into what you'll be covering?

Prof. Kang: I will discuss how language teachers formulate and enact their beliefs, choices, and strategies regarding language and language teaching in today's neoliberal and marketized higher education.

TEC: As a follow-up question, can you discuss in more depth some of the Korea and Korean EFL issues in your research?

I try to create space in which students feel safe asking questions and exploring ideas together...

Prof. Kang: I am not sure if the term "EFL" is appropriate for describing the Korean context, considering the wealth of language input through media and technology. When I left Korea, Korea was one of the sending countries of students going abroad, and I was one of them. Now, Korea is one of the most sought-after receiving countries of international students, and it is wonderful to see so much research about language learning taking place in Korea.

TEC: How do global power relations and inequality shape language practices in international education settings?

Prof. Kang: As I've gained more experience in research and higher education, I have become more aware of the impact of politics on education at the macro level and language practices at the micro level. With the rise of multiple power nation-states and cultural hubs, language education will evolve to reflect an increasingly multipolar world.

TEC: Your work often bridges theory and practice. How can educators apply your research findings in classroom or institutional settings?

Prof. Kang: Critical reflection, open discussion, and collaboration through professional development opportunities like the Korea TESOL conference would be the way forward.

TEC: Could you pull back the curtain on your teaching approach at the University of Illinois? We are curious about the methods and lecture styles you find most effective. What does a typical semester look like for a student in your Researching Global Education classes, for example?

Prof. Kang: As someone trained in applied linguistics, I use a heuristic approach to my teaching and mentoring. I see myself as a facilitator rather than a tour guide. I try to create space in which students feel safe asking questions and exploring ideas together, rather than prescribing a single itinerary for everyone.

TEC: How do you encourage your students to critically engage with philosophy and methodology rather than seeing them as abstract concepts?

Prof. Kang: I start with questions to figure out where they are and then guide them regarding frameworks and methodology options they can navigate to answer their questions.

With the rise of multiple power nation-states and cultural hubs, language education will evolve to reflect an increasingly multipolar world.

TEC: Given your background, I imagine you're quite familiar with Korea. That said, the question of "downtime" still stands. What are you most looking forward to doing or seeing once the conference wraps up? Are there any specific Korean experiences you've been missing, living in the US Mid-West?

Prof. Kang: I look forward to walking on busy streets and doing window shopping. In my small college town, I rarely see many people on the streets – streets are reserved for cars.

TEC: It's been a privilege speaking with you, Professor Kang. Thank you for giving our readers so much to think about. We look forward to continuing the discussion at KOTESOL 2026.

Prof. Kang: Thank you for the opportunity to connect with KOTESOL community members.

Interviewed by Andrew White.

▲ ***Professor Kang looking for Korean snacks at Walmart.***

"Compassion Can Be a Useful Framework for Supporting Learners as They Navigate Anxiety and Classroom Silence"

Professor Kilryoung Lee, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Kilryoung Lee is a professor of TESOL and chair of the English Education Department at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul. He received his PhD in TESOL at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and upon his return to Korea, took up a position at Yeungnam University before moving to Seoul to his present university, HUFS. At KOTESOL 2026 this spring, Prof. Lee will be delivering a featured speaker talk entitled "Compassion, Is It Central or Marginal in an EFL Classroom?" The English Connection *was recently able to engage Prof. Lee to quiz him on a wide variety of topics. — Ed.*

***The English Connection* (TEC)**: I would like to begin with a thank-you for finding time to squeeze this interview into your schedule. Let's start off with some background information – if you were writing an autobiography on Kilryoung Lee before life at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), what interesting tidbits would it include?

Prof. Lee: I worked as an English teacher at a girls' high school before going abroad for graduate studies. Although I had experience working in the business sector – including a position at a major conglomerate shortly after college – I ultimately felt drawn to education, a path strongly influenced by my family's long-standing connection to teaching.

Once I began teaching in a school setting, I quickly realized I was in the right place. I genuinely enjoyed teaching and building meaningful relationships with students. Those years in the classroom have been invaluable, and they continue to influence my work today as a professor in a college of education, where I prepare and mentor future teachers.

TEC: Something that many people may not know, or may not remember, is that in your younger days, before moving to HUFS, you were a member of KOTESOL. Tell us about that period of your life.

Prof. Lee: Wow…! This takes me back to about 30 years ago, when I was teaching at Yeungnam University in the Daegu area. Yes, I was a member of the Daegu-Gyeongbuk Chapter, I still remember Professor Steve Garrigues – if I recall correctly, he was the chapter president – inviting me to present. I also gave a couple of presentations at other chapter meetings.

TEC: One of your research interests is teacher education. Do you think Korea is doing a good job in preparing undergrads for their first year of teaching in the classroom? And what about in-service training programs – are they as effective as they could be?

Prof. Lee: In many Korean universities, especially well-established flagship institutions, the college of education building often appears older and more modest than other facilities. This reflects the long tradition and enduring social significance of teacher education in Korea. Although the level of respect afforded to teachers may not be as strong as it once was, the profession has historically been regarded highly, and colleges of education have continued to attract academically strong students.

▲ ***Prof. Lee goes mountain climbing with his students every year.***

Overall, colleges of education play a vital role in preparing students to become teachers. Pre-service teachers develop both subject-matter knowledge and the pedagogical skills required to teach English effectively. In addition, teachers working in public schools are highly capable, having passed Korea's highly competitive teacher certification exam.

However, we should acknowledge an important area for teacher growth: Many teachers have had limited opportunities to engage in sustained reflection on teacher identity, professional attitudes, and the deeper purposes of teaching, elements that are essential for achieving professional competence.

Of course, AI-supported instruction is increasingly important in today's information and technology-driven era. However, in both pre-service and in-service education, teachers should be given more structured opportunities to develop reflective teaching skills and to connect reflection to everyday classroom practice. This will help teachers develop a sense of purpose and the values that guide their work, ultimately improving their classroom practice.

TEC: Some scholars seem to have little interest in giving conference presentations and being active in professional associations. But I know that is not you. You have been an active conference presenter and speaker; you have been active in multiple domestic ELT associations, including KATE, where I first got to know you; and you have gone on to be the president of ALAK (Applied Linguistics Association of Korea) and even the president of the prestigious AsiaTEFL. What drives you to this level of service?

Prof. Lee: About thirty years ago, I was actively involved in YETA (Yeungnam English Teachers Association), which is now known as PKETA (Pan-Korea English Teachers Association). After moving to Seoul and joining HUFS, I became an active member of KATE and ALAK as well. I have always valued scholarly communities built around shared professional interests.

Through AsiaTEFL, I was also able to connect with scholars across Asia, expanding my professional network and deepening my understanding of English education in diverse contexts. AsiaTEFL has offered an exceptional platform for exploring the development of English language education in Asia alongside colleagues with similar interests. Serving as the president of AsiaTEFL was particularly challenging during the COVID-19 period. Nevertheless, I am proud that we successfully organized and held two conferences – in India and Indonesia – despite the constraints of the pandemic.

I suggest that compassion can be a useful framework for supporting learners...

TEC: One thing that you and I have in common is a former student. He was my undergrad student and your MA student, and his surname is also "Lee."

Prof. Lee: Professor Ju Seong Lee. Yes, I know you taught him when he was an undergraduate student. He later entered the graduate program at HUFS, where I had the privilege of supervising him. He was among the most diligent and dependable graduate students I have ever worked with. He is now a featured speaker with me at this spring's KOTESOL conference, and I am pleased to introduce him from my perspective, as he was truly an outstanding student.

Nineteen years ago, at the request of President Kwon of Mongolia International University (MIU) – an acquaintance of mine – I recruited volunteer instructors from among my graduate students. During the winter break, they stayed in Mongolia and taught General English and TOEFL to Mongolian university students. Ju Seong Lee was the very first student to raise his hand. While in Mongolia, he sent me a reflection on his teaching experience, and I could clearly sense his enthusiasm. He wrote that when he rehearsed his lessons alone in front of a mirror at four o'clock in the morning, he felt as if his heart might burst. I found his words refreshingly vivid and read them with great interest.

Afterward, I invited him to work as a research assistant while I was serving as director of the Institute of Foreign Language Education. I also asked him to assist me when my department hosted the National English Teachers' Teaching Competition each year. When I organized the "Fathers' School" program at HUFS, he joined me again as an assistant. In every setting, he supported the work with sincerity and reliability.

After completing his graduate studies, I recommended him for a position at a private secondary school. After a few years of teaching there, he went to the United States to pursue his doctorate, and upon completing his doctoral studies, he was appointed as a professor at The Education University of Hong Kong, where he continues to excel in his academic work.

For me, the 2025 AsiaTEFL conference felt different from other conferences for a special reason: The conference chair was Prof. Ju Seong Lee. At the closing ceremony, seven of his students ran up to me, took photos with me, and called me their "academic grandfather." In that moment, I felt both embarrassed and deeply proud.

TEC: At KOTESOL 2026, your featured session is titled "Compassion, Is It Central or Marginal in an EFL Classroom?" Could you give us a brief preview of what that talk will include?

Prof. Lee: In the Korean context, English is not just a subject; it is widely seen as a powerful asset for admission to prestigious universities, employment, and even economic opportunities. However, many Korean learners – like many learners in other Asian contexts – tend to be cautious about speaking up and are strongly influenced by face-saving concerns, which can hinder participation in English learning. In this talk, I will examine these trends and discuss how English teachers can respond. I suggest that compassion can be a useful framework for supporting learners as they navigate anxiety, fear of mistakes, and classroom silence, ultimately helping them participate more confidently in English.

▲ ***Prof. Lee with colleagues at the 2025 AsiaTEFL Conference.***

TEC: I've heard that you have recently published a book. I'm curious as to what that book might be about.

Prof. Lee: I come from a family with a strong tradition in education: Seven members of my extended family have worked as teachers, and I was raised in an education-oriented environment. This background strongly influenced my decision to major in English education. I have long believed that teaching is meaningful and that nurturing others is truly worthwhile.

I began writing this book as a reflection on my thirty years of teaching. In it, I share the joy I have experienced as a teacher and a teacher-educator. The book is organized around three professional settings: my years as an English teacher at Ewha Girls' High School, and my later work as a professor at Yeungnam University and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Across these contexts, the key themes are the happiness I have shared with students and the gratitude I have felt, as an educator, before God. In the book, I confess that if I were given another life, I would not hesitate to choose the life of an educator again.

▲ ***There is a lot of laughter in Prof. Lee's graduate classes.***

TEC: Let's return to this life. Having a bucket list is popular these days. I'm wondering what might be on your professional as well as on your personal bucket list.

Prof. Lee: I have never visited Northern Europe, and I would like to travel there. In particular, I hope to visit Sweden first. I worked for a Swedish company until 1988, and I was scheduled to travel to Sweden for training in 1989. It would have been an exceptional opportunity back then when going overseas was not easily accessible to most people in Korea. However, I chose to accept a job offer as a high school teacher starting in 1989. For that reason, visiting Sweden now would be personally meaningful.

Professionally, I am also working toward publishing my second book on English expressions in context. My first book was published a few years ago, and I am currently collecting additional data with the goal of completing and publishing the second volume within the next couple of years.

TEC: Before we conclude this interview, I'd like to ask you if you have any words for our readership?

Prof. Lee: Thank you so much to you, David, and the organizing committee for making this coming conference possible. I look forward to seeing all the TEC readers at the 2026 KOTESOL conference.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

IDLE: English Learning in the Digital Wild

Professor Ju Seong Lee, Education University of Hong Kong

My own path with English has been shaped as much by experiences outside the classroom as within it. This perspective grew during volunteer work that began in 2000, where I spent time in more than ten different regions, including Cambodia, Mongolia, and Thailand. In those communities, I observed how young people learned languages: not primarily through formal lessons but through daily life – by interacting, helping their families, and engaging with the world around them. That kind of informal, need-based learning left a deep impression on me. It highlighted a truth we sometimes overlook in education: Real language growth often happens when the learner is motivated by genuine interest and real-world purpose. Those early observations eventually helped form the idea I now refer to as "Informal Digital Learning of English," or IDLE – a concept I introduced in 2018 to describe the self-directed ways people use digital spaces for language learning.

There's a fitting coincidence in the term "IDLE" – it sounds very much like the Korean word *aideul* (아이들), which means "children." This connection feels meaningful, because IDLE really is about that childlike sense of curiosity and play. It captures how young learners, and indeed learners of all ages, can naturally absorb language when they are exploring, creating, and experimenting in environments that feel engaging and relevant to them. It's learning that doesn't always look like learning.

For a great many students today, English isn't confined to a textbook or a 50-minute class. It's woven into their daily digital routines. While the classroom rightly focuses on building a solid foundation in grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills, another layer of learning unfolds on smartphones and laptops. This happens when a student watches an English-language YouTube tutorial about a hobby, plays an online game with international teammates, follows a global influencer on Instagram, or uses an AI chatbot to practice conversation. This is the essence of IDLE: picking up language through acting and interacting in digital spaces, often driven by personal interest rather than a grade.

Research from South Korea and various other contexts shows that this informal engagement offers tangible benefits. Studies suggest that learners who regularly spend time in these digital English environments tend to develop greater confidence in using the language. They often show stronger vocabulary recall, improved comprehension, and better speaking fluency. Perhaps just as importantly, they frequently report more positive feelings toward English itself – seeing it less as a difficult school subject and more as a useful tool for connection and exploration. In practical terms, IDLE helps learners bridge the common gap between knowing English rules and feeling comfortable actually using them in real-time communication.

This is the essence of IDLE: picking up language through acting and interacting in digital spaces…

For teachers, this invites a gentle shift in perspective. Digital activity doesn't have to be seen as competing with education; it can be viewed as a potential resource for it. This doesn't mean throwing out the curriculum but rather complementing it. Small, manageable adjustments can make a difference. A teacher might, for example, incorporate a short clip from an English-language vlog into a lesson, ask students to reflect on English music lyrics, or design a mini-project where students use English to research a topic they're already exploring online. The goal is to build a bridge between the structured learning in the classroom and the authentic English students encounter in their daily lives, making both experiences more meaningful.

For fellow teacher-researchers in the KOTESOL community, IDLE opens up several valuable avenues for inquiry and collaboration. There is room to explore how these informal practices can be thoughtfully integrated into Korea's exam-oriented educational system. We can work on developing flexible, locally relevant teaching models that acknowledge and build upon students' out-of-class digital learning. Research could usefully examine how specific IDLE activities – like

Digital activity doesn't have to be seen as competing with education...

reading webtoons, participating in fan forums, or interacting with language learning apps – influence different aspects of language development. Another key area is understanding how teachers can best guide and scaffold this informal learning without taking away the sense of autonomy and discovery that makes it so effective for students.

Moving forward, genuinely supporting IDLE in education involves more than just recognizing it exists. It calls for a considered, supportive approach. This includes providing professional development for teachers to build their confidence in using and discussing digital tools, advocating for school policies that allow for some creative flexibility in how learning is facilitated, and helping parents understand the educational value that can be found within their child's screen time. It also means being mindful of equity – ensuring that all students have the basic access and support needed to participate. By embracing this broader view of how English is learned, we can better support our students in becoming not only proficient test-takers but also confident, adaptable users of English who can navigate the global, digital world with ease.

Dr. Lee's featured session *at KOTESOL 2026 also deals with IDLE: "Informal Digital Learning of English for AI Natives in Low-Resource Areas." He will be giving an invited second session titled "Using AI Tools to Overcome Anxiety and Build Confidence in Language Learning."*

Translanguaging: "A Stance That Aligns Pedagogy with Equity, Empathy, and Justice"

Professor Michael Rabbidge, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Michael Rabbidge will be coming to KOTESOL 2026 from the University of Waikato in New Zealand where he is a senior lecturer. He received his PhD in applied linguistics from Macquarie University, and his research examines translanguaging, language ideology, and identity in multilingual education. Prof. Rabbidge has published widely on translanguaging pedagogy, teacher identity, and critical language policy. He is a featured speaker at the KOTESOL International Conference where he will present on "Reframing English Education: Translanguaging, Identity, and Ideological Resistance." The English Connection *recently had the opportunity to discuss a variety of topics with Prof. Rabbidge. — Ed.*

The English Connection **(TEC)**: Thank you for making time for this interview. It is much appreciated. To begin with, you relocated to the University of Waikato in New Zealand not so long ago. I'm wondering how your teaching situation there might differ from your previous position at Hankook University of Foreign Studies in Seoul.

Prof. Rabbidge: The biggest difference is the sociolinguistic landscape students bring into the classroom. At HUFS, students were often navigating English within a strongly monolingual educational system shaped by high-stakes testing, English-only ideologies, and very clear hierarchies of linguistic value. Much of my teaching and research there focused on creating space, space for Korean, space for emotion, and space for students to position themselves as legitimate multilingual speakers.

At the University of Waikato, I work in a context that officially values multilingualism and Indigenous knowledge, particularly through Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, this doesn't mean language hierarchies disappear. Instead, they become more subtle. My teaching now involves helping future teachers recognise how institutional norms, assessment systems, and "good English" expectations can still marginalise students' linguistic identities, especially migrant and refugee learners. In that sense, the work is different, but the underlying questions about equity, identity, and whose language practices are valued remain remarkably consistent.

TEC: You have spent some time researching the Afghanistan English language learning context. How has your experience there possibly influenced your research trajectory?

Prof. Rabbidge: Researching Afghan learners fundamentally reshaped how I understand language learning as an ethical and political process. In contexts marked by conflict, displacement, and gendered exclusion, English is never "just a language." It is tied to survival, mobility, hope, and loss. That work pushed me to think beyond motivation or proficiency and toward investment, rights, and structural constraint. It made visible how language learners are positioned by forces far beyond the classroom such as geopolitics, policy decisions, and unequal access to education. This has deeply influenced my later work in Korea and elsewhere, particularly my focus on how learners negotiate agency under restrictive language ideologies and how teachers can either reproduce or resist those conditions through pedagogy.

TEC: At the 2025 KOTESOL International Conference, you gave an online presentation on translanguaging. In that presentation you stated that "translanguaging is not just a pedagogical technique; it's an emotional, social, and political act." Could you expound on this?

Prof. Rabbidge: When students are told, either implicitly or explicitly, that only English belongs in the classroom, they receive a powerful message about whose identities matter. Translanguaging disrupts that message. Allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires acknowledges that thinking, feeling, and learning do not happen in one language.

Emotionally, translanguaging reduces anxiety and shame that often accompany English-only classrooms. Socially, it creates safer spaces for participation and collaboration. Politically, it challenges hierarchies that position English as superior and other languages as obstacles.

In Korean classrooms shaped by test-driven accountability and monolingual norms, translanguaging becomes a way for both teachers and students to reclaim linguistic rights and reassert identity. I see it not as a technique to be added, but as a stance that aligns pedagogy with equity, empathy, and justice.

TEC: The benefits of translanguaging are apparent in the single-L1 classroom, which is often the case in Korea. But in situations where learners in a class may have different L1s, can translanguaging be as effective, since a learner's L1 may be different from many or all of the other people in the classroom?

Prof. Rabbidge: Absolutely, though it may look different. Translanguaging is not about everyone sharing the same first language; it's about legitimising how learners make meaning. In linguistically diverse classrooms, translanguaging often involves multimodal communication, peer scaffolding, digital tools, and flexible language norms rather than shared L1 use.

What matters is the stance: Do we treat linguistic diversity as a problem to manage or as a resource to build learning around? Research consistently shows that when students are allowed to mobilise all their semiotic resources such as language, gesture, images, emotion, then participation and agency increase, even when no common L1 exists.

TEC: Your featured session at KOTESOL 2026 also relates to translanguaging: "Reframing English Education: Translanguaging, Identity, and Ideological Resistance." Could you give us a teaser to this May's coming attraction?

Prof. Rabbidge: The session asks a simple but uncomfortable question: What kind of learner and what kind of person does English education currently produce in Korea?

Drawing on classroom research on teachers and students, I show how translanguaging opens up spaces for authenticity, emotional safety, and identity affirmation in contexts long shaped by monolingual and neoliberal ideologies. At the same time, I examine how English-only norms are now being reproduced through new technologies and accountability systems.

The key message is this: that pedagogy is never neutral. Every language choice we make in the classroom either reinforces or resists inequality. Translanguaging offers teachers practical ways to choose resistance thoughtfully, ethically, and with care.

▲ ***Prof. Rabbidge promoting the University of Waikato's educational programs in China.***

TEC: In addition to giving your featured presentation at KOTESOL 2026, what plans do you have for the conference and for this trip back to Korea?

Prof. Rabbidge: Catching up with colleagues and former students is a big part of it. Korea has been central to my professional life, and KOTESOL remains one of the few spaces where classroom practice, research, and teacher identity genuinely intersect. I'm also looking forward to listening, especially to early-career teachers navigating increasingly complex pressures around AI, assessment, and language policy. Those conversations often shape my future research more than formal presentations do.

TEC: Some of your research has involved the Darvin–Norton model of investment that takes into consideration identity, capital, and ideology in language learning. How would you say the landscape of investment is evolving in EFL in Korea? And in English language learning in general?

Prof. Rabbidge: Investment in English in Korea remains intense, but it has become more contradictory. English still carries enormous symbolic capital, yet students are increasingly aware of its emotional cost in the form of anxiety, burnout, and identity conflict. At the same time, access to meaningful returns on English investment is becoming more uneven. What we're seeing is a shift from hopeful investment toward strategic compliance. Students learn English because they must, not because they believe it represents who they are. Translanguaging disrupts this by reconnecting English learning with authenticity and agency, allowing students to invest without erasing themselves in the process.

▲ ***Hosting the 2025 ALANZ Symposium at the University of Waikato.***

TEC: You've done research on the identities of international students in Korea. One study is on "denied rights and neglected duties." What did your research find to be rights denied and duties neglected?

Prof. Rabbidge: International students were often promised English-medium education and institutional support, yet experienced classrooms and systems that operated primarily in Korean without adequate scaffolding. Their right to access education in English was denied, while their duty to succeed independently was assumed. This created identity positions marked by frustration, self-blame, and isolation. The study highlighted how language policy failures are not abstract but are lived emotionally and embodied daily. It reinforced my belief that language education must be examined not only through pedagogy but through ethics and responsibility.

TEC: I'm curious as to what items might be found on your professional bucket list – and on your personal bucket list as well.

Prof. Rabbidge: Professionally, I want to continue building research that speaks directly to teachers' lived realities, especially around issues of multilingual justice. I'm also keen to develop collaborative projects across the Global South that challenge dominant narratives about English and expertise.

Personally, I'd like more time for slow travel, good food, and long conversations, ideally in places where language is messy, mixed, and meaningful. That's often where the best ideas come from.

TEC: As a concluding question to this interview, do you have any words that you would like to address to our readers?

Prof. Rabbidge: Be suspicious of any approach to English teaching that promises neutrality, efficiency, or simplicity. Language education is always about people – their histories, emotions, and futures. When we make space for multilingual realities, we don't lower standards. We raise humanity.

TEC: Thank you, Prof. Rabbidge, for this interview. It contains much food for thought. I'm looking forward to your return to Seoul and to your featured session at the conference.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

"Professional Growth Does Not Require Having All the Answers"

Professor Kyungja Ahn, Seoul National University of Education

Kyungja Ahn is a professor in the English Education Department at Seoul National University of Education (SNUE) as well as the dean of academic affairs and director of the English Integrated Education Center. At KOTESOL 2026, she will be speaking on bridging theory, practice, and research in second language teacher education. Prof. Ahn is quite active in publishing research journal articles and also books. She has participated in the development of the National English Curriculum and of English language textbooks for elementary and secondary levels. She is the current president of the Applied Linguistics Association of Korea (ALAK), an executive director for AsiaTEFL, and a board member of KAPEE. Between business trips and national holidays, Prof. Ahn found time to participate in the following interview for The English Connection. *— Ed.*

***The English Connection* (TEC)**: First of all, I would like to thank you for your time for this interview with *The English Connection*. I'm sure you have a busy schedule that you've had to fit this into. You're currently a professor at SNUE. Could you tell us about yourself before taking up a position at SNUE?

Prof. Ahn: Thank you for having me – it's a pleasure to be interviewed for *The English Connection*. Before joining Seoul National University of Education (SNUE), my academic training and early professional work centered on applied linguistics and second language teacher education. I completed my PhD in applied linguistics at the Pennsylvania State University, where my doctoral research examined how English student teachers learn to teach within a curriculum reform context, from a sociocultural perspective.

In the years surrounding my doctoral work, I was also engaged in university-based teaching and research in Korea, including affiliation with the Department of English Education at Seoul National University. Through these experiences, I became increasingly interested in the "bridge" between what teacher education programs emphasize and what teachers actually face in classrooms, especially during times of curricular and policy change. That background naturally led me to SNUE, where I could work more directly with pre-service and in-service teachers through coursework, mentoring, and research-informed professional learning.

TEC: Recent iterations of the Ministry of Education's English education policy have been commendably forward-looking, but the reality in the classroom is that instruction remains traditional and test-driven. What needs to be done for policy to become practice?

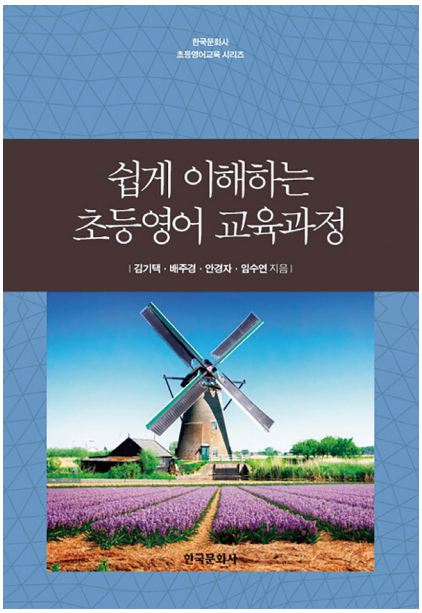
Prof. Ahn: I agree that policy intentions have become increasingly future-oriented, but policy becomes practice only when the conditions of teaching change. In many schools, what ultimately drives instruction is still high-stakes assessment – what gets tested, what gets reported, and what teachers feel accountable for. So, one key step is assessment alignment: If we want communicative competence, interaction, and process-based learning, then evaluation systems need to value those outcomes in visible and credible ways. Without that alignment, even well-designed policies can remain aspirational.

Just as important is implementation support that is practical and sustained. Teachers need time, resources, and professional learning that is embedded in their work, such as coaching, collaborative lesson design, classroom-based inquiry, and opportunities to see workable examples in similar contexts. Policy messages should be translated into "doable" instructional routines, sample tasks, and formative assessment tools that reduce teachers' planning burden rather than add to it. Finally, implementation needs flexibility: Schools differ widely, so policies should set clear goals but allow multiple pathways – supported by teacher communities and local leadership – to help teachers adapt reforms to their students while keeping the core intent intact.

TEC: Korea is a high-tech nation, and one of the ways that they exhibit this in English education is with humanoid robots in the classroom. Do you think this is sound pedagogy and/or the most effective use of edtech funds?

Prof. Ahn: Robots can be an interesting symbol of innovation, but the real question is whether they improve learning in a way that is sustainable and equitable. In language education, sound pedagogy depends less on the device itself and more on how it supports meaningful interaction, feedback, and sustained practice. If a humanoid robot is used as a novelty – brief, scripted, or disconnected from classroom goals – its impact is likely limited. However, in carefully designed lessons, a robot could function as one additional conversational partner, especially for young learners who may feel less anxious practicing simple routines. Even then, it should complement, not replace, teacher-led scaffolding and peer interaction.

In terms of funding, I would prioritize edtech investments that scale and directly strengthen everyday teaching and learning: reliable classroom infrastructure, high-quality digital content aligned with curriculum, tools that support formative assessment and feedback, and professional development that helps teachers integrate technology purposefully.



▲ ***Easy-to-Understand Elementary English Curriculum (2019). By Kyungja Ahn and co-authors (Hankuk Munhwasa Pub.).***

TEC: How could ChatGPT, or generative AI in general, best be incorporated into the elementary school English curriculum?

Prof. Ahn: In elementary English, generative AI like ChatGPT is most useful when it supports three goals: meaningful language use, timely feedback, and learner confidence, while keeping safeguards in place. Rather than treating AI as a "replacement teacher," I would incorporate it as a guided learning partner under clear teacher-designed routines.

For elementary settings, implementation should be teacher-mediated and safety-focused: Use school-approved platforms, avoid collecting personal data, teach "AI literacy" in age-appropriate ways (e.g., AI can be wrong; ask the teacher; don't share personal information), and emphasize that the classroom goal is still human communication, that is, students using English with classmates and the teacher.

TEC: One of your research interests is in the area of second language teacher education. Beginning teachers, even though they may have mastered the intricacies of the lesson, so often say that they were not well prepared for what they faced in the classroom. Why is that, and what can be done to better prepare the teacher-in-training for the realities of the classroom?

Prof. Ahn: That gap happens for several reasons. First, learning "the intricacies of a lesson" often means learning to plan – objectives, procedures, materials, and timing. But classrooms demand far more than planning: Teachers must make rapid decisions while managing attention, behavior, emotions, mixed proficiency, and unexpected disruptions. In other words, novice teachers may have strong lesson knowledge but limited situated judgment, limited ability to adapt in real time.

Second, many teacher education experiences are still organized around idealized conditions: a cooperative class, smooth transitions, and a predictable lesson flow. When practicum opportunities are short or uneven, beginning teachers may not get repeated chances to practice the hard parts: responding to silence, dealing with off-task behavior, handling wide level differences, or giving feedback efficiently without losing momentum.

To better prepare teachers, we need teacher education that is more practice-based, more cyclical, and more supported. This includes (a) high-quality, sustained practicum with repeated teaching opportunities, (b) guided rehearsal and simulation of common classroom challenges, (c) video-based reflection using short clips from real classrooms so trainees learn to "notice" student thinking and classroom dynamics, not only their own performance, (d) mentoring structures that connect university coursework to school-based coaching, and (e) classroom-based inquiry habits.

Ultimately, preparing teachers is not only about teaching them what a good lesson looks like; it's about helping them develop the professional skills to respond calmly, flexibly, and ethically when the lesson doesn't go as planned, which is often the reality of everyday teaching.

TEC: The title of your featured session at KOTESOL 2026 is "Second Language Teacher Education: Bridging Theory, Practice, and Research." Could you give us a preview of how this bridge might be constructed?

Prof. Ahn: In the session, I'll argue that the bridge is not a single method but a design principle: We construct it when we create routines that allow teachers to move back and forth between (a) conceptual lenses from theory, (b) the realities of classroom practice, and (c) evidence from research, especially evidence they can generate from their own classrooms.

Concretely, I will introduce a few "bridge structures" that are practical and scalable: (a) practice-based learning cycles, (b) a shared language for noticing and decision-making, (c) mentoring and collaborative inquiry, and (d) alignment with curriculum and assessment.

My goal is for participants to leave with both a framework and specific routines – so the "bridge" becomes something teachers can actually walk on in their everyday work, not just an abstract idea.

TEC: As the current president of ALAK, could you reflect briefly on what ALAK accomplished in 2025, and share your key plans and priorities for 2026?

Prof. Ahn: Thank you for the question. In 2025, ALAK's 20th executive board focused on expanding both academic exchange and practical professional development for our members. We successfully ran a range of scholarly and educational programs throughout the year, including a series of online research methodology workshops designed to strengthen members' research capacity. We also offered an AI Literacy Expert course centered on hands-on, classroom-applicable skills, exploring how emerging approaches – such as AI-supported "vibe coding" – can be connected to teaching and learning contexts.

Looking ahead to 2026, we plan to build on this momentum through sustained, well-connected activities. We will begin the year with the "2026 ALAK Bridge Talk," and continue with research methodology workshops and an international conference. Our journal will continue to be published regularly on a quarterly basis. Importantly, early 2026 will also mark improvements in our communication infrastructure.

TEC: You are also the financial affairs director of AsiaTEFL. The association is now more than 20 years old. How has AsiaTEFL contributed to ELT in this part of the world?

Prof. Ahn: AsiaTEFL has played a substantial role in strengthening ELT across Asia by functioning as a regional, nonpolitical professional forum that brings together teachers and researchers to share, discuss, and disseminate knowledge and practices in English language teaching. Since its foundation period in the early 2000s, the association has built a sustainable infrastructure for professional exchange and scholarship in the region.

A key contribution has been its annual international conference, which provides a consistent venue for educators across Asia to present research, exchange classroom innovations, and build cross-border networks, supporting both established scholars and emerging professionals. AsiaTEFL's impact is also strongly visible through its flagship publication, *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, which has become an important outlet for research and pedagogy focused especially on Asian EFL/ESL contexts.

TEC: To conclude this interview, what would you like to say to the readers of *The English Connection*?

Prof. Ahn: Thank you for reading and for the work you do in English language education. Whether you are a classroom teacher, a teacher educator, a graduate student, or a researcher, I hope you recognize that your day-to-day questions and reflections are not "small" – they are where meaningful change begins.

I would also like to encourage readers to use professional communities – like KOTESOL and other associations – not only to learn new ideas, but to find colleagues who understand your context and can think with you. *The English Connection* itself is part of that support system: It helps us share experiences, research, and practical insights across schools and institutions. I look forward to meeting many of you at KOTESOL 2026, and I hope we can continue building bridges – between theory, practice, and research – together.

TEC: Thank you, Prof. Ahn, for this interview, for your participation in our upcoming conference, and for your leading role in bridge-building in the field of English education.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

Critical Pedagogies of Care: Reimagining English Language Teaching in Asia

Professor David D. Perrodin, Mahidol University, Thailand

Walk into almost any English classroom in Asia today, and a familiar tension appears immediately. On one side, there is pressure. Students are expected to perform. Teachers are expected to produce results. Schools are expected to demonstrate progress through scores, rankings, and visible outcomes. Parents seek assurance that English will open doors to opportunity. Ministries seek evidence that reforms are working. Universities seek graduates who appear internationally competitive. Digital platforms promise faster learning, while social media quietly reminds students that someone, somewhere, speaks better English at this very moment.

On the other side, there is real life. Students arrive after long days, carrying fatigue and expectation. Some are confident and outspoken. Many are cautious and deeply afraid of making mistakes. Some have access to private tutoring and international experiences. Others rely entirely on classroom instruction. Some speak several languages at home. Others feel embarrassed by their accent. Some believe English will transform their future. Others believe failure is inevitable before they begin.

Teachers live inside this contradiction every day. They teach English, but they also manage emotions, mediate peer relationships, complete administrative tasks, and carry the invisible labor of caring for young people. They balance inspiration with compliance, innovation with accountability, care with authority.

In such conditions, English teaching easily slides into compliance mode. Lessons center on covering content, completing units, preparing for examinations, and satisfying institutional requirements. These actions are often necessary for survival. However, when compliance becomes dominant, the deeper purpose of education begins to fade. English becomes a commodity. Learning becomes performance. Students become outcomes rather than persons.

English language education must be treated as a transformative social practice rooted in empathy, inclusion, and ethical responsibility...

This article introduces an alternative orientation called Critical Pedagogies of Care. This approach connects critical awareness with compassion-centered teaching. It emerges from collaborative dialogue among educators across Asia who seek to sustain intellectual rigor without sacrificing human dignity. Its central claim is simple: English language education must be treated as a transformative social practice rooted in empathy, inclusion, and ethical responsibility rather than a narrow system of transmission and compliance.

At the 2026 Korea TESOL International Conference, my featured session will introduce the Asian Orientation Model of Critical English Language Teaching, an applied framework grounded in Critical Pedagogies of Care. The model is organized around four interrelated dimensions: dialogic learning, teacher reflexivity, contextual adaptability, and pedagogies of care. It is not a fixed method or universal curriculum. It is a professional stance that guides how teachers design lessons, respond to learners, interpret policy demands, and sustain practice over time.

Why This Matters Now

Across Asia, students are more digitally connected than any previous generation, yet many feel increasingly socially isolated. They consume English content daily through videos, games, and social media, yet when asked to speak in class, they hesitate, apologize, or fall silent. They assume inadequacy before they begin.

At the same time, the gap between learners is widening. Some students attend bilingual schools, travel abroad, and interact in English beyond the classroom. Others have no access outside a few hours of weekly instruction. The difference is not only linguistic. It is economic and social. Over time, English proficiency becomes a visible marker of privilege. Classrooms quietly display who belongs to a global future and who does not.

Institutions are also transforming rapidly. Schools adopt digital learning platforms. Universities expand English-medium programs. Ministries introduce new competency frameworks and assessment reforms. Innovation is celebrated, yet it often arrives with intensified accountability and performance measurement. When innovation is framed primarily in terms of efficiency and outcomes, teaching becomes technical and transactional. Teachers become implementers of systems rather than designers of learning.

Critical Pedagogies of Care respond by reframing essential questions of teaching. What kinds of people are students becoming through English learning? Who feels seen in the classroom, and who feels invisible? Which voices are encouraged or silenced? How do everyday routines reproduce inequality or interrupt it? These questions position English teaching as a moral and relational endeavor rather than a purely linguistic one.

English as Voice, Not Only Accuracy

The first dimension of the Asian orientation model is *dialogic learning*. Dialogic learning treats English as a medium for meaning-making rather than a code to be memorized. Learners use English to express ideas, share experiences, question assumptions, and respond to one another. Language becomes something they live rather than display.

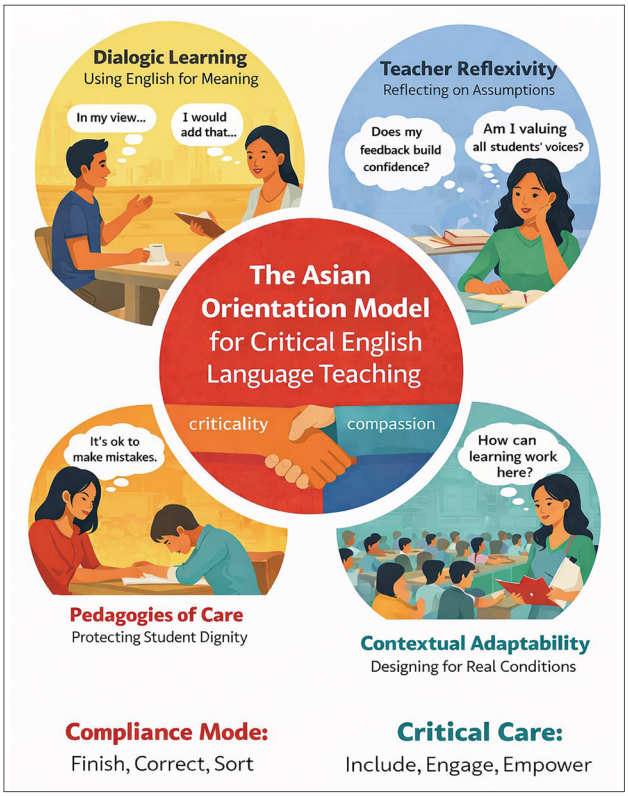
In many Asian classrooms, silence is associated with respect. Speaking up can feel risky. Dialogic learning builds safe

pathways from silence to participation through structured interaction, guided reflection, and collaborative discussion. Over time, students discover that English is not only about correct answers. It is also about having something worth saying.

The Teacher as an Ethical Interpreter

The second dimension is *teacher reflexivity*. Reflexivity is the habit of examining personal assumptions and professional routines. Every language classroom is evaluative. Teachers correct errors, assign grades, control participation, and define norms. The critical question is what values guide these decisions.

Reflexive teachers examine whether correction builds confidence or reinforces shame. They notice whether they reward students who already have external access to English. They consider whether native-like pronunciation is unconsciously equated with intelligence. Reflexivity protects teachers from mechanical compliance and restores professional agency by interpreting policy through the lens of learner dignity and local reality.



▲ ***The Asian Orientation Model.***

Intelligent Design in Real Classrooms

The third dimension is *contextual adaptability*. Across Asia, teachers work in large classes, examination-driven systems, and limited-resource environments. Idealized imported methods often fail under these realities.

Contextual adaptability emphasizes intelligent design under constraint. Teachers adapt strategies to fit their classrooms while preserving core educational values. Large classes become manageable through structured interaction. Examination systems become opportunities to integrate critical thinking within required genres. Multilingual classrooms become spaces where first languages support comprehension and identity rather than being treated as interference.

Adaptability is not a compromise. It is professional creativity. It keeps critical pedagogy practical rather than idealized.

Protecting Dignity Through Pedagogies of Care

The fourth dimension is *pedagogies of care*. Care is an ethical responsibility to create learning conditions where students grow without being diminished. Many students experience English classrooms as sites of judgment, where fear of error becomes fear of speaking. A pedagogy of care establishes psychological safety. Errors become natural steps in development. Feedback preserves motivation; assessment guides improvement rather than punishing failure.

When English becomes a tool for exploring the world students inhabit, learning becomes purposeful rather than performative.

In practice, care often looks like small choices made consistently. A teacher offers a short moment of preparation before whole-class speaking so that no one is ambushed. Correction is delivered in ways that protect face, such as quiet reformulation, brief private guidance, or a class-wide focus on a pattern rather than a single student. Tasks are designed with multiple entry points so that students can participate without being publicly ranked by fluency. Materials include Asian experiences and voices so that students do not learn English as if their lives are "outside" the language. When care is present, students take risks more readily, persist longer, and recover more quickly from mistakes.

Care also extends to teachers. Educators carry emotional labor that is rarely acknowledged. Collegial care through shared reflection and collaboration sustains humane practice, especially when policy pressures and workload make teaching feel isolating.

From Compliance to Critical Care

In compliance-driven teaching, English is a commodity. Students become data points. Teachers become technical workers. Success is measured by test performance and content coverage.

In Critical Pedagogies of Care, English is a transformative social practice. Students are human beings with voice, agency, and dignity. Teachers are ethical interpreters. Rigor remains, but it is rooted in engagement rather than fear. The aim is not to remove standards but to change what counts as success: participation that grows over time, thinking that deepens, and confidence that does not depend on perfection.

Teaching English as a Human Practice

English language teaching in Asia is being reshaped by technological acceleration, policy pressure, and widening inequality. In such conditions, teaching can narrow down to compliance and performance. Students can experience English as anxiety and sorting rather than possibility.

Critical Pedagogies of Care offer another path. By integrating dialogic learning, teacher reflexivity, contextual adaptability, and pedagogies of care through the Asian orientation model of critical English language teaching, English teaching becomes more than language instruction. It becomes a practice that cultivates voice, dignity, ethical awareness, and genuine human connection. It maintains high standards without humiliation. It develops critical awareness without cynicism. It nurtures confidence without false praise.

At its heart, this model rests on a simple principle: Language education should affirm human dignity. When English teaching is rooted in compassion-centered criticality, it sustains meaningful learning and genuine connection, even in times of uncertainty and change. That is the invitation of this session, and that is the future of English language teaching worth building together.

This article *takes its title from Prof. Perrodin's featured session of the same name, where he will discuss Critical Pedagogies of Care in more depth in reference to English language teaching in the Asian context.*

Making the Most of the Breaks

By Bill Snyder

Today is the last day of the semester. I'm in my office, with meetings scheduled with two students. One is finishing up revisions on his thesis. His thesis was in the roughest shape of any thesis I have seen in my career when he submitted the draft for his defense. We have been working, meeting every other day, reviewing the comments from his committee, and making plans to improve the text. He goes home and returns each meeting with revisions. I'm pleased at this meeting to see that he has almost completed the revisions, and his thesis is now more than passable; it is good. He will be able to submit a final copy and graduate. The other student wants to talk about preparing for developing her thesis proposal next semester. She has an interesting idea to pursue and knows already what she needs to do over this break (read a lot) but needs a bit of reassurance that she really is on the right track. She is, and I tell her so. This is how the semester ends.

I think it is worth reflecting on what restores us and why it does in order to better understand ourselves as human beings and as teachers.

It has been an unusually hard semester. One colleague has been away on sabbatical, so his classes have been distributed among the rest of us. At the same time, we have an unusually large cohort of students finishing because of a few students returning from leaves of absence. Colleagues have gotten sick and needed time off, which had to be covered. My preparation time before classes started was curtailed by a need to deal with family issues, so I have felt like I've been catching up the whole term and not quite getting there. My real fear is that it has shown in my classes, but my students' comments at the end of the term have been reassuring. I still have grading of final papers and projects to do, submission of syllabuses for the next year, and a myriad of little bits of preparation to do for those classes. But I am tired and am looking forward to the break.

Teaching is tiring work. I never leave a class without feeling a bit drained of energy, and this feeling can build up over time. The end of the semester always seems to come just as my strength is about to give out. This semester more than ever. I'm sure that many of you feel the same way. The wear and tear of teaching is an underappreciated part of this profession. We all look forward to the breaks we get, whether a weekend, a one-day holiday, or the longer breaks that come between terms. We need this time for rest and recovery. Restoring ourselves physically and mentally is essential to our general wellbeing and to our ability to be our best for our students when classes start up again. There is not a single, specific recipe for how to do this. Each of us has our own ways to bring ourselves back to our peak. I think it is worth reflecting on what restores us and why it does in order to better understand ourselves as human beings and as teachers.

I know one colleague who pushes himself very hard all through the semester, keeping late hours, providing astounding amounts of feedback to his students very quickly, all while preparing for his next semester's classes, developing new materials, revising lesson plans, and thinking of new ways to challenge himself as a teacher. But the minute his grades are submitted, he is gone. For two months, no one will see him except on social media when he puts up photos of his travels. He does no school work at all during this time, and has told me he works so hard in the semester in order to not have to think about teaching for a long time. Letting his mind focus on other things – exploring another culture, improving his photography skills (he has won prizes for his photos) – allows him to return to work ready to dedicate himself to his classes and students at a high level again. He feels that if he were thinking about teaching all the time, it would actually lower what he could give when he does teach.

Another colleague uses her breaks to turn herself into a student. While some of her time goes to webinars related to

language teaching, more of it goes to courses in whatever she is curious about at the time. She's not looking to earn another degree or leave language teaching but just enjoys the discovery of something new. In recent years, her explorations have included creative writing, architectural history of the city she lives in, and ceramics. She has told me that she feels freer now as a student than when she was earning a degree and enjoys being able to study whatever she wants. At the same time, she does bring something of this experience back to her teaching practice. Being a student raises her empathy for her students. She is reminded how hard it is to learn something new, how often efforts end in failure, and what joy there is in succeeding. She also says that she has gained a greater awareness of how her teachers help her succeed, which she feels she can bring back to her classes.

Other colleagues have their own ways to get their grooves back in blocks of free time. One goes for long bicycle rides in the mountains near his home, another keeps a large garden going, a third says the breaks are when he gets to spend more time with his children and be a bigger part of their lives. Each one talks about how these things help them recognize that teaching is only part of their life, and that these other parts are also necessary parts of who they are.

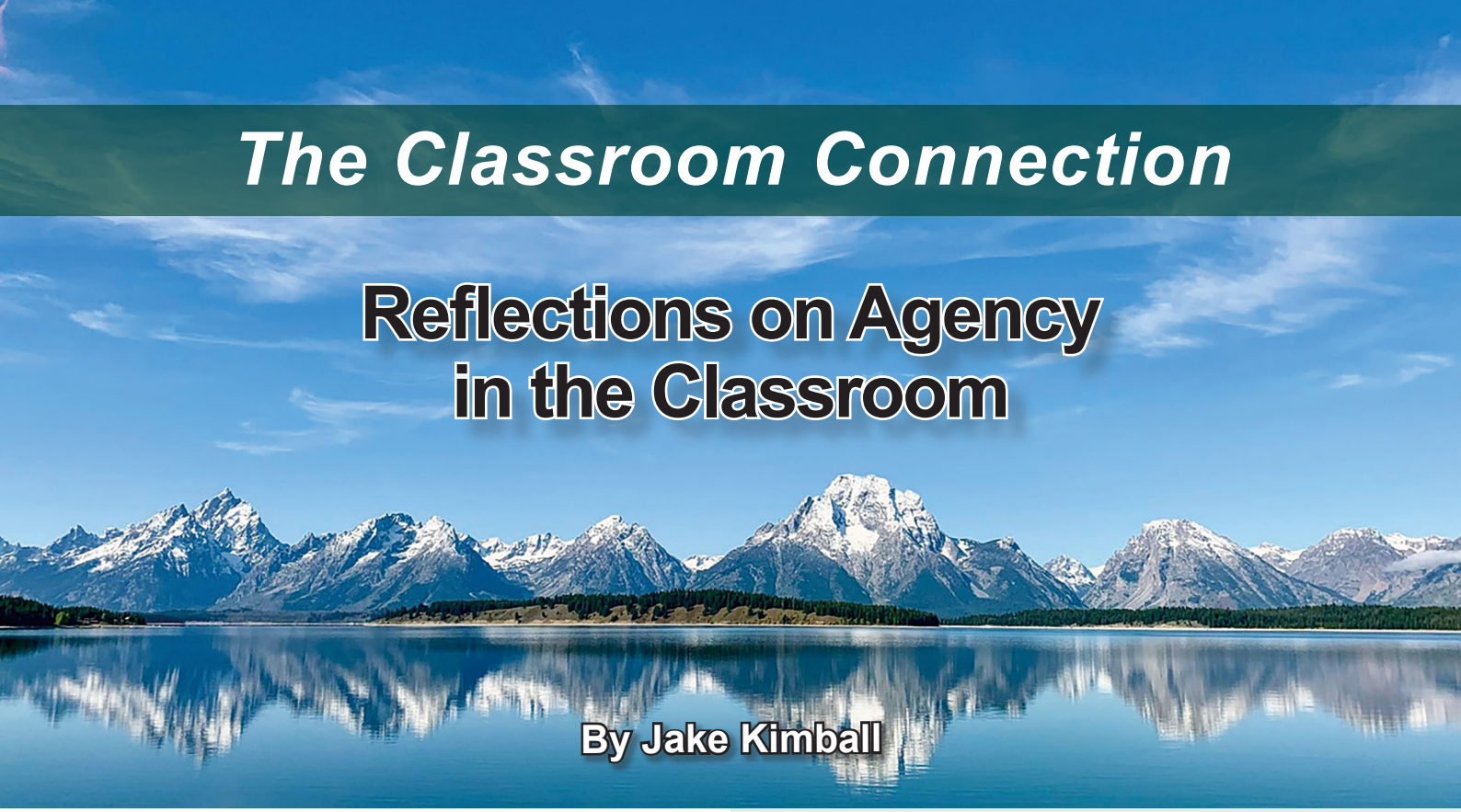
I'm writing this column at the end of January, finishing it literally on the last day of the semester. Tomorrow, I'll be off on my break, doing some things that I know will restore my energy after this semester. I will be on a plane tomorrow to Southeast Asia, where over the course of a month, I'll make one presentation and do two workshops at conferences. The workshops will be on a topic I'm newly interested in and I'm hoping to learn from what other teachers have to say about it. In the two weeks between the conferences will be one week of doing what I see as absolutely nothing: sitting poolside or at the beach, swimming a bit, and reading novels. The second week, though, will be back with teachers again, visiting schools in another country, observing classes, and, if asked, doing some mentoring as novice teachers prepare to share their learning at one of the conferences. At the start of March, when you are reading this, I'll be back at work and really ready to move back into the rhythms of a new semester.

That reminder is something that I can carry with me through the busier, more structured days of my paying job.

It may seem like what I do in the break is not so much of a change from my work, but really it is, for me. It is smaller doses, less formal, and maybe more importantly, free of having to deliver summative evaluations. All of these things make the kinds of interactions I will be having feel more intimate, more equal, and more about building connections in the teaching community than instructing someone. Doing the parts of my job that I enjoy the most in a shorter, more relaxed timeframe than the routine of school demands is restorative. It reminds me that I love teaching as an act on its own, freed of institutional burdens. That reminder is something that I can carry with me through the busier, more structured days of my paying job. I know that I will feel caught up, not behind. I will have the level of energy that I need to lift my students and support them in trying their very best. And I know that I will feel good about what I am doing.

Like I said before, teaching is hard work. We need our breaks, our opportunities to gain back some of the energy that we put into our work. But I don't think it is enough to just have the break. Reflecting on and recognizing the value for ourselves, of what we do when we have time away from work, is crucial to our wellbeing as people and to our continued growth as professionals. We are at our best when we know what is best for us and act on it. So, what are you going to do to make the most of your breaks?

The Columnist
Bill Snyder is a professor in the International Language Education Program: TESOL at Soka University in Japan. He has worked in teacher education for over 25 years in the U.S., Korea, Turkey, Armenia, and Japan. His current research focuses on the lives and wellbeing of teachers across their careers and on the mentoring of novice teachers. Email: wsnyder7@gmail.com



Reflections on Agency in the Classroom

By Jake Kimball

It's that time of year when we gather at Sookmyung University, one of the few moments when we meet face-to-face. For me, it's a valued tradition, and I encourage all my colleagues to attend. Beyond the presentations and workshops, though, it's the conversations among educators and the choices we make afterward that really shape our classroom practice.

This year's 2026 KOTESOL International Conference brings together the interconnected themes of criticality, innovation, and compassion. What stands out for me is the organizers' reminder that language education isn't just a technical practice – an accumulation of carefully orchestrated input leading to strategic output. It's also an ethical and transformative experience, shaping how we respond to students in real classrooms. These ideas form the guiding principles of this *The Classroom Connection* article.

Reflection Point 1: To what extent should our classroom practices move beyond technical expertise to become transformative experiences grounded in criticality, innovation, and compassion?

Expectations

I have been ruminating over this very question for some time now. In the past, as a teacher, I had always had minimum expectations for achievement. From my point of view, all learners could succeed if they tried. After all, I carefully consider different elements of microteaching based on my professional training: i+1 content, comprehensible instructions, modeling, scaffolding, wait time, lesson staging, etc. Casting a wider net, I consider appropriate methodology, feedback, assessment, and classroom dynamics. In my classes, participating in activities accounts for most of the students' final grades. More than midterm and final exams. This highlights to students that semester-long participation is more important than exams. For learners unwilling to actively participate, I assumed the only missing ingredient was that fire inside. Or at least, that's what I thought at the time.

Reading the room is a valuable teaching skill.

Reading the room is a valuable teaching skill. Being aware of student engagement helps instructors make decisions on the fly – what Schön (1992) calls reflection-in-action. It is the ability to interpret what is happening right at the very moment of a critical incident. In this fleeting moment of awareness, we can consider alternative responses and implement a change that immediately affords a more equitable outcome.

A Tale of Two Students

Imagine if you will, a tale of two students. Part of a lesson where students completed a mini-project or groupwork has just been completed. And in the next stage, students are expected to report to the whole class. One student sits in the back row, earbuds in, smiling at a smartphone, coursebook open to the wrong page. They're eyeing an escape through the back door again.

Meanwhile, near the front of the class – the action zone – another student sits quietly, earbuds in, notebook open, notes neatly written. They don't interact with classmates. Moments later, they break out in hives.

What do you do? Does reading the room give you any additional information before nominating one of them to report? What is the difference between these two students? What intervention would you make on the spot? How could you manage student behaviors with more compassion and understanding? And if your lesson requires participation to earn points for a grade, would you deduct their points for being unwilling? Give them participation points regardless? Or find alternative ways to contribute and earn points?

Reflection Point 2: What messages do your grading and participation policies send over the course of a semester? Who benefits from those messages, and who might be quietly disadvantaged?

Reflection-on-Action: Your Baseline for Awareness

Reflection-on-action. Again, from Schön (1992), there are opportunities to reflect after the fact, when it is possible to transform events into learning moments. After all, appropriate changes can be made down the road.

Reflection Point 3: Think back to a moment when a student appeared off task. From your point of view, why do you think they disengaged? Now try looking at the situation from the student's perspective.

Like many teachers, I keep office hours and try to use my time with intention. One habit that helps is keeping a short reflective journal after class. It helps me remember what I did, how engaged students were, and what felt successful – or not! I also have a checklist of prompts from an observation scheme. I keep this in an Excel file. These prompts give me ideas to think about, too. And I often keep a reflection-on-action journal, using deeper prompts to connect more academic ideas to classroom practice. Ideas for this originate from classroom issues that interest me (and questions or commentary that arise from my reading habit).

These small steps can be considered micro PD, bite-sized chunks of professional development.

For example, regarding the case of two students unwilling to contribute, two issues immediately sprang to mind: engagement and agency. I brainstormed ideas in my classroom journal, considering my own interpretation of events and the students' possible inner motives. Later in the week, I sifted through my bookcase to find books on engagement and agency. My go-to resource is Thornbury's New A-Z of ELT. It offers baseline information to get started. Then I consulted Teaching by Principles (Brown & Lee, 2015) and Engaging Learners in Contemporary Classrooms (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Modern English Teacher and ELTJ are also impactful resources to consider reading. All of these resources discuss the concept of agency in depth and offer remedies.

Reflection Point 4: To what degree does your job give you meaning, a sense of fulfillment? In other words, how much agency do you have in your position? Create a micro PD plan that suits your interest and available time.

Teacher Agency

Criticality, innovation, and compassion all contribute to my internal sense of agency. And these three roads point to a professional development pathway. Exploring classroom events is central to feeling that my job is meaningful, and, if I am lucky, it leads to innovation in the classroom. These small steps can be considered micro PD, bite-sized chunks of professional development. My personalized learning pathway, designed with my interests in mind, helps me sustain my career as an EFL teacher.

Learner Agency

Moving to learners, what does agency look like for them? Thornbury (2017) gives the briefest of definitions: "Learners are said to have agency if they are in control of their own learning" (p. 12). He also notes that agency squares with critical pedagogy. The entry closes with a familiar scenario: "Learners who feel that their learning is out of their control – and who depend on the approval of the teacher – many languish in a state of 'learned helplessness.'" Brown and Lee argue that "agency should be at the center of planning, reflecting, evaluating, and re-planning classroom instruction" (p. 101). What steps can be taken to ensure that our students have a modicum of control in their educational pursuits?

Drawing first on Brown and Lee (2015), they recommend engaging in activities that promote identity and voice, allowing their personal ideas and opinions to shine. In short, provide sufficient tasks that allow for personal expression during individual and groupwork. Think authenticity. Learners could reflect on their past learning experiences, conduct their own needs analysis, write and read haiku, and much more.

Engaging Learners in Contemporary Classrooms dovetails nicely with Teaching by Principles, as both emphasize autonomy and introspection. There is a valuable discussion on learner beliefs. Moreover, the authors recommend a wide variety of actions that teachers can take to build agency into their lessons. One salient idea that resonated with me is developing learners' sense of achievement, enabling them to perceive tangible success.

In the end, teaching is less about that perfectly designed lesson and more about how we respond to what unfolds right in front of us. Reading the room means slowing down, questioning our assumptions about engagement, and making ever-so-minor but compassionate adjustments in the moment. These choices don't require a dramatic overhaul of our teaching practice, but they can make classrooms fairer and more equitable. As this year's conference suggests, criticality, innovation, and compassion live in these everyday classroom decisions that support learner agency while sustaining our own sense of purpose as teachers.

References

Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. (2015). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (4th ed.). Pearson.

Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z. (2020). *Engaging language learners in contemporary classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.

Schön, D. A. (1992). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315237473

Thornbury, S. (2017). *The new A–Z of ELT*. Macmillan Education.

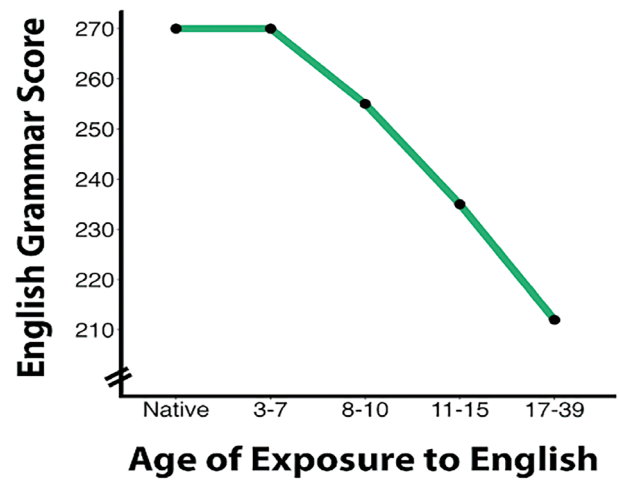
The Columnist

Jake Kimball is an instructor at Semyung University. Within KOTESOL, he is the facilitator of the Classroom Practice SIG. His interests include classroom dynamics and willingness to communicate. He enjoys journaling to maintain a reflective mindset. And when he finds time, he can be spotted hiking the Haeparang-gil, Korea's coastal trail. Email: ilejake@gmail.com

The Neuroscience Behind the Critical Period (and Its Friends)

By Dr. Curtis Kelly

Children learn languages faster than adults. They just seem to absorb new language naturally, while adults have to work at it. This led Eric Lenneberg to propose the *Critical Period Hypothesis*, sometimes also referred to as the *Critical Age Hypothesis*, a period starting at birth and ending around puberty. At that age, something odd happens to the brain that makes it less adept at just picking up new language, especially in terms of hearing foreign phonetic systems and pronunciation.



The relationship between age of learning a second language and total correct responses on an assessment of grammar for a second language (Johnson & Newport, 1989)

Lenneberg's theory has been widely accepted in our field, inspiring numerous criticisms and refinements. When does the critical period really end, at puberty or in the late teens? Is there no critical period for vocabulary? Is it linked to lateralization of hemispheres (which we no longer believe). And are there different critical periods for different parts of acquisition, such as sound and grammar?

Others have also pointed out that adults, well past the critical age, are more adept at language learning if it is done through study, even if they are barred from mastering a foreign accent. They are also far less likely to suffer from the "use it or lose it" of children.

This theory is big. It is important. It means we can't teach language to children and adults the same way. But one thing about it amuses me: how language teaching professionals often refer to the "critical period" in the singular, as if only one exists. Most are surprised, as I was, to learn from neuroscience that there are numerous critical periods, I suspect hundreds, that occur all throughout our lives. It is all about plasticity, one of the great discoveries of neuroscience that came to maturity in the nineties.

Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganize and rewire its neural connections, and that is the basis of all learning. Not all areas of the brain have the same level of plasticity, nor is plasticity constant in the areas that have it. One part of the brain might be very plastic for one time period, and then harden in another (Buzsáki, 2019). Thus, we have *critical periods*, also referred to as *sensitive periods* where a part of the brain temporarily becomes super plastic. That is why children with high plasticity in their language areas learn (and lose) language skills so quickly.

How, and whether, change occurs is highly dependent on environmental influences. The world shapes us in these critical periods and if you think about it, that is why we teachers are so important. We give learners the necessary experiences to feed the changes, the growth. Of course, parents, siblings, peers, play, and just rambling through the world do this as well.

Two Critical Periods

Let's look at a couple of examples. One of the earliest studies that show how critical period work was conducted by Hubel and Weisel way back in the fifties. They raised two groups of kittens, one group exposed to only horizontal lines and the other exposed to only vertical lines, even in the stripes in the caretakers'

The brain is also pruning connections, especially after we hit a connections peak at two or so. We lose about half.

clothing. The results of this experiment were staggering. Each group of kittens became literally blind to lines running the other way. For example, cats from the horizontal-lines group could see a chair seat and jump up onto it for a nap, but kept banging into the legs. During a critical period of these kittens ocular development, visual input that fired neurons that processed lines going one way led to their being strengthened, while the unfired neurons, for lines going the other way, died off, never to return.

That helps explain how a critical period works. In a critical period, the brain reduces a brain "fertilizer," BDNF, causing a neuronal famine. Neurons that work, get fed, while the others starve. Critical periods are not permanent and multiple periods exist for different kinds of development. Keep that in mind the next time you see

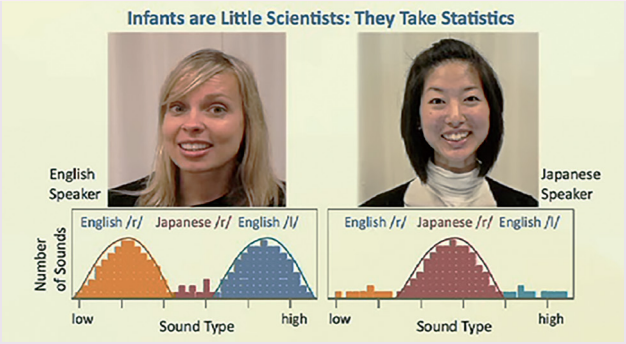
- a child believing that if a line of coins is spread out, it has more coins in it than before
- a child suddenly being able to read at age 5
- an adolescent brain developing super "social sensitivity"
- a person like Curtis Kelly failing in geometry in grade 9 and excelling in the same course a year later
- your husband finally starting to listen at age 40 (speculative; might be fiction)

This means, of course, that it is completely wrong to think of the brain like I once did, as being hard-wired. Although we are born with almost all our neurons formed, only 20% of the connections between them are in place. Then, in infancy, we are forming over a million new neural connections *every single second* (Harvard, 2025)! The brain is also *pruning* connections, especially after we hit a connections peak at two or so. We lose about half. This is not a loss in intelligence; it is fine tuning for greater efficiency. Interestingly though, it is now theorized that schizophrenia might be caused by over-pruning, and autism by under-pruning – thus explaining their sensitivity to noise and light.

We can see how pruning works in the next example of a critical period, my all-time favorite, illustrated by Patricia Kuhl's research on how babies learn phonetic systems. Babies are born, as she puts it, as "citizens of the world," with the ability – meaning neural connections – to hear any phoneme in any language (Kuhl, 2011). However, in a critical period between the age of 8 and 12 months, the neural connections for sounds not reinforced by caregiver utterances are lost.

For example, Japanese generally can't distinguish between L and R sounds. That is because, as this illustration shows, English speaking moms give lots of phonetic input for separate R and L sounds, while Japanese moms just give the Japanese R-L-D sound combo. As a result, brain scans show Japanese babies can hear R-L differences after birth, being "citizens of the world," but they lose that ability between 8 and 12 months, a critical period for sound specialization, and instead become "mother-tongue specialists." Even the sound of their babbling changes.

... there are numerous critical periods, I suspect hundreds, that occur all throughout our lives.



In other words, our babies are Weisel and Hubel's kittens. During that critical period, neurons for mother-tongue sounds are activated, and they survive and become even stronger. The rest disappear or are reassigned, and are very, very, *very* hard to get back.

Like Japanese with R-L sounds, most Americans cannot hear Chinese shi-shu differences. But when Patricia Kuhl put American babies in front of Chinese speakers, for a measly twelve hours of input, they kept that ability. Keep in mind that babies of 8–10 months can't understand *any* language yet, so they are just sampling sounds.

Even more fascinating is that American babies exposed to the same Chinese speaking encounters for the same amount of time, via television, showed zero retention of the ability to hear that sound. *Zero*! The babies would crawl right up to the TV, showing interest, but that form of input had no effect. Take that Baby Einstein!

But getting back to the topic, as we can see, there are many critical periods when the brain becomes sensitive and responsive to certain environmental inputs, whether sensory or motor. Here is a list of a few critical periods, all of which have lifelong consequences:

In infancy, 0–2.5: visual, hearing, language, touch processing, motor skills (movement and coordination), attachment to caregivers
In early years, 2.5–6: executive functions, stress response system (without early soothing, any stress can be disabling later), social skill acquisition, empathy, identifying threat and safety, conservation of mass
In childhood, 5–9: emotional regulation, more stress response, symbolic proficiency (about the fourth grade), mathematical operations
In adolescence, 10–19: frontal lobe development: social sensitivity, abstract reasoning

Connecting and pruning during critical periods is the main form of long-term brain development in the early years. That kind of change happens up through the 20s, but two other kinds of changes start taking over in adolescents and adults, myelination and neural deployment.

References

Buzsáki, G. (2019). *The brain from inside out*. Oxford University Press.
Harvard University. (2025). *Brain architecture*. Center on the Developing Child. https://developingchild.harvard.edu/key-concept/brain-architecture/
Johnson, J. S., & Newport, E. L. (1989). Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, *21*(1), 60-99.
Kuhl, P. (2011). The linguistic genius of babies. *TED Talk*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2XBIkHW954

The Columnist
Curtis Kelly (EdD) founded the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG and is professor emeritus of Kansai University in Japan. He has written over 30 books, 100 articles, and given over 500 presentations. This article was adapted from one he wrote for the MindBrainEd Think Tanks. Please subscribe! ctskelly@gmail.com

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Redefine your future with flexible study options

Further your career with the University of Birmingham – a QS World Top 50 centre for the study of English Language and for Linguistics.

Study a Masters part-time over 30 months and start in February, April, July, October or December.

Explore our distance learning programmes:

- MA TESOL
- MA Applied Linguistics
- Postgraduate Certificate in TESOL
- Postgraduate Certificate in Applied Linguistics
- PhD English Language and Applied Linguistics

Find out more
birmingham.ac.uk/pg-elal

We progress
We activate
birmingham.ac.uk