

Beliefs of Native English Speaking Teachers about Korean EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated native English-speaking teachers' beliefs about Korean EFL learners. Participants consisted of 3 Americans and 15 Canadians, who were on a university teaching staff in Korea. Data collection employed questionnaires and interviews. Results revealed that participants perceived that (1) students viewed English as a class or a test; (2) class dynamics and educational systems adversely influence students' EFL learning; (3) group-oriented activities were popular; and (4) studying Korean language and culture were worthwhile. Regarding teaching strategies, participants endeavored to take English out of textbooks and relate it to reality so that students create their own language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there are a great number of native speaking English teachers (NSs) in Korea. Since NS teachers are from foreign cultural backgrounds, they confront the task of teaching based on their own cultural experiences and beliefs as an underlying framework for their teaching styles. While teaching, NS teachers can also expect to experience the culture-specific aspects underlying Korean students' classroom behavior and attitudes toward learning English.

In order to serve EFL students' needs and fulfill their expectations, NS teachers ought to try to understand the constraints of the Korean educational and cultural systems but NS teachers may have trouble accepting teaching styles that are foreign to their own experiences and background. In the end, NS teachers will employ new approaches in their classrooms; they may apply communicative activities in teaching their students and avoid a rote memorization pedagogy. Although NS teachers may not reform the Korean educational system, their beliefs can point out what works well and what needs to be improved in teaching EFL students (Schleppegrell 1994).

Within the extensive literature on EFL, however, comparatively little research has focused on NS teachers' perceptions which can provide guidance for novice NS teachers and teacher educators who prepare NSs in TEFL. Also, insufficient attention has been paid to identifying and controlling the factors that might potentially influence Korean EFL students' characteristics (e.g., classroom participation, favorite activities, etc.) (Barratt & Kontra, 2000).

Thus, the purposes of this study are to explore native English speaking teachers' beliefs about teaching EFL in Korea and to provide implications for Korean EFL classrooms. The research questions addressed in the present study are the following:

- (1) What are native English-speaking teachers' beliefs about teaching EFL in Korean classrooms?
 - a. What are some specific features of Korean EFL learners?
 - b. What are some favorite classroom activities among Korean EFL learners?
 - c. What kinds of teaching strategies do they employ in Korean EFL classrooms?
- (2) What are some implications of these findings for NS teachers in Korean EFL classrooms?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, ESL teachers' beliefs can be divided into three different approaches: a skills-based approach, which deals with the discrete skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; a rule-based approach, which focuses on grammatical rules and knowledge of the language system; and a function-based approach, which concentrates on interactive communication and cooperative learning, and the skill to function in authentic social situations (Johnson 1992; Richards & Lockhart 1999).

According to Richards and Lockhart (1999), teachers' belief systems, which greatly influence their decision-making processes and behavior, come from a variety of sources. For example, teachers' own learning and teaching experiences, perceptions of learning principles, and personal preferences concerning teaching patterns, arrangements, and activities, affect their beliefs about language learning and effective teaching. Teachers of English in Hong Kong defined their primary role in the classroom as: (1) provide effective learning experiences, (2) demonstrate accurate language use, (3) respond to students' questions, and (4) correct learners' errors (Richards, Tung, & Ng 1991).

Unlike the teaching of other subjects, language teaching is affected by social, political, psychological and practical values, which are not under control of the teachers (Bernhardt & Hammadou 1987; Gardner 1985; Spolsky 1989; Wilkins 1978). Thus, perceptions of language teaching effectiveness may vary according to the given context. Brosh (1996) explored the characteristics of the effective language teacher perceived by both non-native foreign language teachers and students in the Israeli educational system and reported (1) knowledge and command of the target language, (2) ability to organize and explain as well as to spark and sustain interest and motivation among students, and (3) fairness and availability to students as the desirable characteristics of an effective language teacher. Another major finding was, however, that familiarity with the target culture, positive attitudes toward the native speakers of the language, conducting the lessons in the target language, and knowledge of curriculum, were revealed irrelevant and unimportant for effective language teaching.

Due to the current reaction against bilingual education programs in the United States, an increasing number of mainstream (regular) teachers are expected to teach ESL students in the future. It is of importance to note that mainstream teachers are found to have neutral to slightly positive attitudes toward teaching more ESL students.

To be more specific, the teachers' attitudes toward ESL students can be affected based on six predictors. That is, mainstream teachers are more likely to have positive attitudes when: they have taken a foreign language course or a multicultural education course; are in the humanities, social sciences, or natural/physical sciences versus applied disciplines; have experienced some type of ESL training; have taught outside the United States; have socialized with a multicultural population of ESL students; and are females (Youngs & Youngs 2001).

Likewise, Penfield (1987) reported the findings of a survey of mainstream teachers' perceptions of limited English proficient (LEP) students and ESL teachers. 162 New Jersey teachers who taught LEP students in their classrooms but who had had no ESL training responded to an open-ended questionnaire. The responses revealed that the mainstream teachers believed they should improve academic learning for LEP students. Nevertheless, they seemed to have difficulty integrating content and L2 development, perceiving these two as separate and distinct, not as an integrated process in which both they and ESL teachers need to be involved. Also, the mainstream teachers indicated that math, spelling, and phonics were the easiest subjects to teach to LEP students and that regular textbooks and curriculum did not guide them to meet the cultural and personal needs of LEP students. Finally, they noted that ESL teachers were expected to act as liaisons between mainstream teachers and the parents of LEP students and to teach academic skills and major subject areas (for example, social studies, science, etc.).

Ferris and Tagg (1996) examined university professors' perceptions on ESL students' difficulties with listening/speaking tasks. Respondents reported that their ESL students have problems with class participation, asking and responding to questions, and general listening comprehension skills as opposed to lecture comprehension skills. They believed that their ESL students' inability or unwillingness to be involved in class discussions was attributed to cultural inhibitions. The respondents recommended that ESL instructors work hard for authenticity and that they provide students with opportunities to practice listening to real lectures of different speakers, interact with native speakers, deal with genre-specific vocabulary, reading materials, and writing tasks.

In this era of globalization, it is becoming more common for Korean EFL students to be exposed to native English speaking teachers' instruction in and/or outside of class. In fact, a great number of English speaking instructors are employed to promote Korean EFL students' English proficiency through EPIK (English Program in Korea) operated by the Ministry of Education. Choi (2001) examined the problems and effectiveness of EPIK through surveys. The findings include that since there are no examinations, students are often not interested or do not concentrate, so the native speakers have difficulty getting attention in class. Furthermore, large class sizes are another major impediment that teachers have to confront. The majority of the native speakers believed that 11-20 or 21-30 would be an ideal class size as compared to classes of over 40. Thus, it can be assumed that Korean EFL students may not perform to the best of their abilities unless they are under pressure (such as from tests) and that the number of students in classrooms affects the effectiveness in conducting English lessons.

Even though NS teachers bring 'authenticity' to classrooms, not all of them may be perceived to be good enough to facilitate students' EFL improvement. There have been previous studies that criticized the conflict between Western ways of teaching and non-Western contexts (Alptekin & Alptekin 1990; Bahloul 1994; Bax 1997; Kramsch 1993).

Barratt and Kontra (2000) reported on two studies that surveyed both positive and negative comments about NS teachers from their students and EFL host colleagues. The first of the two studies was administered to 116 students and 58 teachers in Hungary and the second to 100 students and 54 teachers in China. Regarding the high ranking positive categories, among Hungarian teachers, NS teachers' new methodological insights were valued while Hungarian and Chinese students appreciated NS teachers' leniency regarding grades and error correction. Hungarian students valued NS teachers' native-language authenticity and Chinese students stressed that NS teachers played games and tried to have them participate in activities. Among the most frequent negative categories, in Hungary and China, both teachers and students criticized NS teachers' lack of professional preparation, insight into students' typical language problems, and familiarity with the host educational system. The results provided implications that an orientation should be provided for new NS teachers that includes a description of the curriculum and the types of the methodology familiar to students; TEFL preparation should help NS teachers understand cultural diversity and the way students approach learning.

III. METHOD

1. Case Selection

The study reported here used a case study approach to investigate beliefs about teaching EFL in Korea by native English speaking teachers. During the spring semester in 2001, as the participants of this study, the researcher selected 18 native English speakers who were on the teaching staff at a university located in Gyeongsang province, Korea. The 16 male and 2 female participants (3 Americans and 15 Canadians) ranged from 29-41 years in age; their experience in teaching EFL varied from 3 to 10 years, with an average of over 5 years. At the time of the study, all the participants were teaching multiple English conversation courses (such as freshmen English conversation, intermediate English conversation, etc.).

2. Data Sources and Procedures

1) Questionnaires

In mid-March of 2001, the participants were asked to fill out the first questionnaire. The first questionnaire, a self-report form adapted from Pak (1986), intended to examine student-student interaction during their classes in general and included both open-ended questions and a question with fixed alternatives. (see Appendix 1). Two weeks later, the second open-ended questionnaire was administered to the participants (see Appendix 2). The purpose of the second questionnaire was to

gather basic information about the participants' beliefs about teaching Korean EFL students such as their difficulties in conducting classes and their students' constraints, favorite activities, etc.

2) Interviews

In mid-April of 2001, following the 2 surveys, the researcher conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with the participants individually to further explore the NS teachers' beliefs about teaching EFL in Korean contexts and their teaching styles and strategies. The process of the interviews was supposed to be dynamic. The researcher provided a set of questions to ask the participants, but randomized the question order during the interviews. When the participants were talking, any intriguing points were explored in more detail. Notes were taken of the key words or phrases in order to be brought up later in probing for further information. In addition, the researcher was careful to keep neutral about the content of what she was hearing from the participants (Merriam 1988; Seidman 1991). The interview questions were adapted from Richards and Lockhart (1999) (see Appendix 3). All the interviews, which lasted for about an hour each, were audio taped and transcribed verbatim afterwards. While transcribing, the researcher wrote reflective notes regarding themes and distinctive features as they emerged. Transcripts of the interviews were later double-checked by the participants for verification.

3) Data Analysis

Data analysis does not refer to a simple description of the collected data but to a process where data is interpreted by the researcher. The themes and coding categories were not created beforehand and applied to the data but emerged while examining the data sources that had been gathered throughout the entire research study: questionnaires and interviews. Analytic induction and constant comparison were employed as analytic devices. In doing constant comparison, patterns emerging within the data were coded by category and simultaneously compared with all other occurrences under study (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; LeCompte & Preissle 1993; Li 1998).

In order to initiate data analysis, the researcher repeatedly read the collected data. While reading, reflective memos, comments, and questions were written in the transcriptions' margins. The memos and comments were turned into an outline into which data was classified. The outline began as an attempt to plot the emerging regularities. Patterns and regularities were developed into categories into which subsequent items were organized (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; LeCompte & Preissle 1993).

With regard to coding categories, Holsti's (1969) guidelines were taken into account for the sake of efficacy. The categories corresponded to the research questions, the categories were thorough - so all relevant items of the collected data could be sorted into a category, and the categories were mutually exclusive to each other, so no single item could belong to more than one category.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Native English Speaking Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching EFL

The 18 participants believed a good language teacher was one who could (1) facilitate students' learning, (2) assess the students' level and adjust accordingly, (3) gain students' interests, (4) entertain students, (5) be creative and interested in teaching, and (6) be open minded and understanding to the students. They said that in order to increase the interest level of students, it was important to present oneself as someone that the students would like to talk to outside of the classroom. Students are more likely to open up and talk in the classroom after they have talked to the teacher outside of the classroom. To induce the students to talk, it is helpful to show flexibility and a sense of humor. In addition, the participants reported that if the teacher enjoyed the act of teaching, the students would be more likely to enjoy the class, too.

The participants pointed out, in EFL learning, teachers and students should be equal parts of a whole. They should expect their students (1) to actively participate in the classroom activities, (2) to feel free to speak up whenever they have difficulty, (3) to stop and challenge their teacher, (4) not to be afraid of making mistakes, (5) to assist each other, and (6) to argue with their teacher if he/she is wrong.

1) Korean EFL Learners' Specific Features

(1) Negative and passive attitudes toward learning English

With regard to the participants' beliefs about teaching Korean EFL students, they found that their students often associated English with 'pain.' Half of the participants suspected that students had been criticized for making EFL mistakes in their secondary schools, which might have led them to be overwhelmed from the pressure of trying to make the 'right answer.' The participants reported the problem that most students do not see English as a language; rather they view it as a 'test' or a 'class' that they have to complete in school. Thus, there are not enough real attempts for genuine communication in English among the students. The participants stated that students need to understand that mistakes are essential in learning any language and that only through mistakes can they hope to improve their language skills.

The participants believed that their Korean EFL students in general are still quite shy and afraid to lose face in front of their classmates and to make mistakes in front of their teachers. So the participants pointed out that their students, especially lower level students, appear to be searching for the correct answer and are reluctant to speak loudly. The students often have difficulty understanding that the answer is not as important as the skills used and demonstrated in stating the answer. They feel that if they mumble, teachers don't hear the mistake, so their mistake is not made. As a NS teacher listens to their expression in English, he/she can offer a solution that will allow them to communicate their point more easily. However, students often put the problem

before the solution and blame themselves for not having the solution in the first place.

(2) Weaknesses in spoken English

Most participants considered that Korean students need a little more emphasis on stress and intonation rather than grammar and vocabulary and that intonation is more problematic than pronunciation. Native English speakers, especially North Americans, tend to punch the first syllable or accented syllable of an important idea and slur the remaining sounds. Therefore, the flat intonation of Korean makes English intonation difficult to master for Korean EFL learners. Half of the participants felt frustrated due to the fact that regardless of their attempts to help students correct their pronunciation and intonation, they often fall back to their 'original' ones after all.

(3) Variables of classroom performances

Korean students' performances in an EFL classroom are reported to vary according to their personality, motivation, and gender. The kinds of students the participants feel perform best in their classes are: (1) shameless students who are not afraid of making mistakes and laugh at themselves when making mistakes, (2) motivated and outgoing students who are willing to take risks, (3) curious and loud students who are actively involved in classroom activities, and (4) female students rather than male ones.

(4) Major constraints

First, the greatest factor is a lack of confidence. The participants discovered that Korean EFL students often begin to build confidence in low level courses when surrounded by classmates whose exposure to English has been more limited than their own or on a par with it. The confidence-building part of this is good, but it fools these students into a false sense of security because they come to believe that their own class microcosm is representative of the macrocosm of all English classes. As a result, they join other classes later on and encounter groups of students at a much higher ability level than their previous classmates. They rapidly become discouraged and often end up dropping the new course. This sends their entire English competence plummeting because they cease all English studies, telling themselves they'll take the course next semester. Though unspoken, students cling to the vain belief that next semester they'll encounter a different group of students, more representative of their previous class.

Second, average Korean students are obsessed with the belief that they have to speak 'perfect' English. The participants said that this might be a cultural phenomena based on awareness of peer relationships or learner behavior due to an excessive early focus on grammar studies. Korean students are embarrassed to speak English in public for fear of ridicule or even for fear of excessive attention. Most of the participants also mentioned that no matter how well a student speaks English, the Korean traditional attitude is not to

'show off.' Korean students rather try to be modest and get along with others. Otherwise, they make other people feel bad.

Third, as the Korean society is still quite traditional and very homogeneous, Korean students have not had as much exposure to foreigners as most native English speakers. Thus, Korean students are often unsure of how to approach and talk to foreigners. Students, especially those from smaller communities, may have little opportunity to interact with foreigners outside of the classroom. These students are especially afraid and reluctant to speak because they do not know how to act with a foreigner and choose to remain quiet because they do not wish to cause offense. It is a problem that students have not acquired the habit of increasing their volume in the situations where understanding is difficult. Instead, they usually decrease their volume in such instances, thereby making conversation more difficult, which leads to frustration.

Fourth, the Korean educational system does not encourage active participation of students in the classroom. Rather, the traditional view of education in Korea is that of 'teacher as endless fountain of wisdom and information' and the students are 'empty vessels' to be filled by the teacher with his knowledge. Therefore, students lack autonomy in their own learning and prefer to take a passive role in the EFL classroom. This is satisfactory where learning is mostly a matter of acquiring information. The participants, however, thought that language is, for the largest part, learning a skill, even though there is a lot of memorization involved (such as vocabulary and grammar rules). Language acquisition depends less on acquiring information and depends substantially more on acquiring skills. What distinguishes competent English speakers is creativity, spontaneity, and an intuitive sense about what sounds right, which is acquired through extensive practice.

2) Favorite Classroom Activities among Korean EFL Learners

(1) Group-oriented

The participants found it difficult to initiate and maintain solo activities in class; Korean students do not like to be singled out. Rather, students enjoy task-based activities that allow them to participate and/or compete as groups or pairs; they are less likely to be shy in a small group situation. It is noteworthy that games, which require students to compete against each other in groups, are perceived to be favorites. Once the participants give the students a task to perform in class, they do not interfere with them unless the students are unable to do the task on their own and need help.

On average, the most effective group sizes are believed to be of about 3 to 8 students. Large groups let lazy students slack off and this may cause resentment by the other students. Groups that show a wide variation in ability level seem to function better in smaller groups. Students, as individuals, have their own preferences so that any one style or activity will be boring to a certain percentage. Therefore, the participants perceived that activities should be varied at about 10 to 20 minute intervals.

(2) Creative

Anything that gets the students out of the textbook is also popular (for example, creating and acting out a short skit). The participants give students examples, but do not let them use those examples. Rather, they encourage the students to use the language they know to create in collaboration with peers. In doing so, the participants make sure that students do not have to worry about grammatical accuracy. At first students feel insecure, but as they go along, they get the hang of it and become proud of their creative work. The participants do not believe in a classroom centered on a teacher and a lecture format because that is not the way people learn a language in a real situation; lectures and rote memorization do not cross over to real communication.

(3) Mixed old with new and familiar activities (skills)

When developing a group activity, over half of the participants reported that it was effective to mix new activities and/or skills with old familiar activities and/or skills. That way, students were more likely to become interested and stay alert in class. The participants also indicated that activities must be demonstrated; verbal instructions alone are often not sufficient. If an activity is complex, the teacher can demonstrate to one pair how to do the activity, and let that pair teach the class. Games or competitions that are too unfamiliar tend to be resisted at first, as the students have difficulty understanding the basic rules and strategies of the activity. On the other hand, an activity that is too familiar can quickly become too easy and be considered boring by the students.

(4) Culturally relevant

The participants realized that their students were impressed if they showed knowledge of or asked about Korean culture, language, or geography. Of course, the principal language of communication in their EFL classroom is English; however, they found that using the occasional Korean sentence and showing knowledge of Korean culture or geography usually gains the students' attention. Similarly, asking about these things can often elicit more detailed answers and responses than questions about most other topics. Also, students usually respond more fully regarding questions about their personal life or family.

Half of the participants indicated that the use of Korean is frequently useful in explaining some complicated concepts and ideas. Students seem to be more responsive because they know that the teacher is likely to understand and share the frustrations of learning a new language. Moreover, 12 participants pointed out that most Korean students have a natural curiosity about Western culture so in order to motivate and stimulate them, they try to harness this in the classroom as well.

2. Native English Speaking Teachers' Teaching Strategies in Korean EFL Classes

1) Reality

All the participants believed that students cannot learn a language just by studying language divorced from reality. Therefore, the most important thing is to take English out of the textbook and put it into real life; for this, realia is crucial in the classroom. This is difficult to introduce into an EFL learning environment, but it's best for getting students to think in the here and now. Ten participants mentioned that if possible, they'd like to get their students outside of the classroom. In large classes, however, this is not very realistic. It is important to get students to see the world around them as a world of English. That way, they are more likely to work at developing their English skills naturally. It's never a part of their world until the students see English around them.

2) Role-plays

All the 18 participants demonstrated that role-play(s) in EFL classrooms are useful; students are encouraged to speak up and are less likely to be shy in such a situation. Using a conversation in a textbook, the participants often attempt to have students incorporate objects and actions from their daily lives. This is believed to be good for getting them to work with each other constructively and listen to what each one is saying. However, when the participants have students practice a conversation in a textbook, they often ignore what is being said to them and simply listen for their own cues. This is believed to be useless in helping students' conversation ability.

3) Students' interest level

Most of the participants (15) indicated that while teaching in class, they check on students' interest level in different ways. They watch students' body language and alertness and ask follow-up questions. The participants thought that the more L1 (Korean) students use in class, the less they are interested in the topic or activity. Nine participants reported that they sometimes give students a list of topic areas and have them write something about the topics that they are interested in.

4) Variation

The participants specified two major obstacles they encounter in conducting their classes. First, classes often have students of mixed levels, so the participants found it challenging to match the materials appropriately with the students' abilities as a whole. Second, class sizes are almost always too large; on average there are forty to forty five students enrolled in a class. Large class sizes make it difficult to examine students' needs and preferences. Thus fourteen of the participants pointed out that they attempt to occasionally make small changes in their teaching methods in order to maximize the effectiveness. The occasional new experience from time to time is believed to make the class more fulfilling for both the teacher and the students. The change could be "temporarily permanent" or semi-permanent depending on its nature and how well it is received by the class. However, making changes that is too large or

too often can be confusing for the students. Therefore, the participants thought that making a change just for the sake of novelty should be used in moderation.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary goal of the present study was to investigate native English speaking teachers' beliefs about teaching Korean EFL students. The participants perceived that a large number of students and mixed levels are major hindrances to managing a class and that a lack of self-confidence hampers students' performances, reinforcing the findings of previous studies (Ahn, Park, & Ono 1998; Choi 2001). Furthermore, the participants demonstrated that cultural and class social dynamics often adversely influenced Korean EFL students. The traditional teacher dominant Korean educational system was considered to be an impediment to developing autonomy to facilitate EFL learning.

Concerning favorite classroom activities, the participants indicated that Korean EFL students prefer to work in pairs and groups rather than individually. Thus the present study confirmed the idea that Asians in general are conformists who like to collaborate and treasure harmony (Nimmannit 1998). Surprisingly enough, the participants found it useful to show knowledge of Korean culture and to occasionally speak Korean in terms of maintaining student interest and clarifying difficult English vocabulary. Finally, in employing teaching strategies, the participants revealed that they try to take English out of the textbook and relate it to reality and to have students create their own language rather than simply repeat a conversation in the textbook.

The findings of this study provide three suggestions for novice NS teachers in Korean EFL classrooms. First, Korean students, especially who live in small communities, have had little experiences with foreigners so they are often scared and unsure how to interact with NS teachers inside and/or outside the classroom. Also Korean society is very stratified by western standards, so student behavior is often more passive than western students. Therefore, it may take them a while to get used to a NS teachers class. Thus it is the NS teachers' responsibility to create a non-threatening classroom environment for EFL students to feel secure and perform to the best of their abilities. NS teachers should be informed that presentation assignments and skit performances are necessary in Korean EFL courses. That way, students can learn to make themselves understood in English and enhance their self-confidence as EFL learners. NS teachers should get on a personal level with students and encourage them to get into the habit of adding to conversations, instead of giving short answers.

Second, NS teachers should be aware that they often encounter large classes and a wide range of levels in Korean EFL classes. Accordingly, it is crucial that NS teachers be careful in using idioms and complicated expressions and that they experiment with different activities and types of materials. While trying out many different things, they can develop a feel for what works well in class. Moreover, not every student is the same or learns in the same way, so a variety of teaching strategies and classroom materials can increase the possibility of every student receiving his or her language learning in a preferred way at some time in class.

Third, Korean culture is different from the cultures of English-speaking countries. NS teachers ought to understand that they can offend Korean students by responding to differences negatively or they could be endearing to them by appreciating Korean cultural traditions. Therefore, NS teachers should make efforts to study the language of their host culture (Barratt & Kontra, 2000). That way, they will be more likely to share frustrations and get along well with Korean EFL students.

The present study has certain limitations, which should be addressed in future investigations. First, this research employed a case study approach with a small number of participants teaching in a suburban area of Gyeongsang province in Korea. There were only 3 Americans and 15 Canadians, and only two of them were female. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Replications utilizing a larger number of subjects from a variety of English speaking countries who teach EFL in many different regions of Korea are necessary. The results of such studies might provide more in-depth insights on the investigated issue. Second, future researchers should implement detailed classroom observations of the targeted NS teachers in order to explore how their instructional and evaluation practices are (or are not) reflected in accordance with their beliefs and to recognize how these reflections might influence Korean EFL students' classroom performances and attitudes (Kern, 1995).

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