

# THE FLUIDITY OF TEMPORALITY: THE UNCANNY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAUSE AND EFFECT

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As many scholars have indicated, education is a journey (e.g., Palmer, 1983; Sharp, 1983). More specifically, to me education is a philosophical, biographical, and existential voyage, which leads to the ad hoc conclusion that the traditional concept of causality is inapplicable. As I recall my life, there clearly were significant events that shaped my education and my career path. I was born into a family where both parents were professors. My happiness was my mother's top priority. My father believed that the most important thing for a child was to play and have fun. This was why, while many of my peers were receiving private educations (including early childhood English classes in preschool), I was at the playground with my tomboy sister. Consequently, I did not begin learning English until age 12, in junior high school, which was quite uncommon among my friends. However, my late second language education after the so-called "critical period" (Penfield & Roberts, 1959) did not interfere with my unusually rapid English language acquisition.

While I was practicing writing the English alphabet, my English teacher recognized my speaking talent as superior to that of my classmates. She recommended I attend an English speech competition. Although I was not at that time convinced that I was gifted in languages, with my present-day specialization in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, I now understand that I must have been quite different from my peers. My father, who received his PhD in Chinese Literature, can speak four languages: Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and English. He was a professor of Chinese Literature in Seoul, Korea, before he retired several years ago. I probably inherited some of my talent in foreign languages from him. He agrees with this assertion. My father's theory of child development could probably be categorized as a type of Maturational Theory (Gessel, 1925), which suggests that children should not begin formal study until age six. He also did not allow me to participate in any after-school, private education when I was young.

Once I demonstrated my talent for English, my parents and other relatives assumed that I would study in the U.S. at some point in my life. In my youth, I didn't think about the future; it seemed a foregone conclusion that I would become a professor like my parents. It felt natural for me to major in English in college. Like my father who studied language and literature, I gravitated towards English literature. There were two routes in Korea: English literature and linguistics. I was deeply inspired by a linguistics professor during my college years, who hugely influenced me and redirected my attention to linguistics. Dr. Lee specialized in the linguistic field of pragmatics, and until his class, I honestly had no interest in the subject. His course sparked my intellectual curiosity in linguistics in general. To me, at that time, pragmatics was the culmination of all the linguistics sub-fields. I had little interest in areas such as phonology and syntax, though I excelled in these aspects of the field. Because my studying abroad was a top priority for my parents perhaps even before I was born (regardless of my major), coming to the U.S. to pursue a graduate education became my own goal. It felt like a natural progression.

The biggest tragedy in my life occurred when I was 22 and serving in the Korean Air Force. My mother was diagnosed with cancer, and her condition rapidly degenerated. Before I finished my military service, my mother passed away. There was not even time for me to reach her bedside. When I lost my mother, I became a ship without a captain, a car without a steering wheel. My life lost all direction. I kept traveling forward, but I had no clear idea of where I was headed. My goal had long been in place, but the destination grew hazy. I gradually came to terms with being completely on my own; my life's journey had to continue. Fortunately, my father was on sabbatical at that time and was invited by both Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley to serve as a visiting scholar. He chose UC Berkeley, feeling that the weather and culture would help us to recover from our loss. I am so thankful, because those ten months in Berkeley truly changed me. While there, I tried to be very open-minded in terms of making friends and adapting to American culture. I developed an extremely diverse group of associates who would have been outside my comfort zone at home. Listening to their life stories expanded my understanding of the world and cultures. I found myself to be naturally blended into American life. After a year in Berkeley, I returned to Korea to complete my college degree.

Eventually, I returned to the U.S. for my graduate work in linguistic pragmatics. However, what has happened here over the last several years was outside my imagination and beyond my control. As soon as I began my graduate program in linguistics in Texas, I realized that the study of pragmatics was not what I had hoped; I was deeply disappointed, almost depressed. I was entirely too focused on Neo-Gricean pragmatics. I felt helpless and, to some extent, lost. At that time, one of my classmates suggested that I take some Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) courses, which might offer more job prospects. I became interested in TESOL and achieved the TESOL certificate within a single semester. It was then that I felt my educator identity officially began to develop. After several additional TESOL courses, I grew even more engaged in the field. My TESOL professors inspired me to follow in their footsteps. I next joined a graduate program in Arizona and began pursuing an academic career in applied linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) with special focus on second language writing, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics. I became deeply involved in both teaching and learning.

I was academically active during my two years in Arizona. I gave several presentations at major national and international conferences. Gradually, I learned how to write scientifically-based research papers. In addition, I was elected Teacher of the Year for two consecutive years in my role as an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor. I became very passionate about my study, as well as my future as an educator. However, all the professors responsible for admitting me to the program were scheduled to retire at the same time. I realized that there would be no one at my institution to guide me in my chosen field of research. Once again, I felt lost, at least until Dr. Nelson admitted me to my current teacher education program.

During my first year, I was not sure how I would do; I had gone through so much in the past several years. Changing one's major is no easy task. It is uncommon and can be overwhelming. However, in the middle of my second semester, I realized that my unique background in English literature, linguistics, and TESOL would be useful in my current department. I gradually put everything together and realized that every route I had taken, everything I have experienced, and every person I had encountered had worked together to shape me into the person I am today. Thus, I am

thankful for everything, even the traumas, the obstacles, the challenges, my early narrowmindedness, and all the unexpected events in my life. These were courses in a curriculum designed exclusively for me. Thinking about my academic career, my journey from English literature to linguistics, linguistics to TESOL, and TESOL to language and literacy education, I see now how these various disciplines became the pillars of my educational career, making me unique in the field of education. It was a rollercoaster journey, but it was worth it.

I never saw myself as a goal-oriented person. I often thought such people were materialistic. Because of my parents, when I was very little, I learned about the standardized stages to becoming a professor. Therefore, it is difficult for me to define cause and effect in my own life. Was it that I worked hard to become a professor or that I made up my mind to go through those stages because I knew it took hard work to attain that goal? That is to say, at this “progressive” stage in my life, it is difficult to differentiate cause and effect in my career. Was it merely my “imagined effect” (Solomon, 1994) that led to my behavior, which can then be considered the cause of my career? Perhaps, then, I am indeed goal-oriented, though the goal was not created by me. What I have learned from my past is that the current goal might be very different from my eventual destination.

Throughout my life, I seldom spent time thinking deeply about myself. I believed that I was not interested in introspection, even though I cared about my wellbeing. I tried to let my life run its “natural” course. I did not spend time exploring who I was or asking myself important questions like: What do I want to be when I grow up? My life and career had perhaps been designed by my parents. I am not complaining. I was a good and obedient boy. They suggested a kind of job and life, and I accepted their suggestion. I had the chance to reject it, but I chose their path because I felt it would be best. My life had progressed according to that simple formula. I would study hard and become a professor. It is possible, though, that my parents’ approach was reductive and romantic. Many parameters were overlooked. Life is complicated and a life in academia is particularly complex.

Thinking about my future, who I am and what I have done thus far as a scholar-to-be in language and literacy education, I see now that my background in English literature has provided the foundation for my research in literacy education; literature provides the contents of and materials for literacy. My education in linguistics has equipped me with the expertise to analyze language in terms of its sound (phonemic awareness), grammar (morphology and syntax), and meaning (semantics and pragmatics). My experience in TESOL has afforded me the professional knowledge necessary to explore second language acquisition and foreign language pedagogies. Finally, in my current Language and Literacy Studies doctoral program, I have explored theoretical foundations, policies, aspects of curriculum and instruction, discourse studies, and qualitative research methodologies. I am excited to learn how these new additions to my education will shape me going forward. Ultimately, I hope to teach various, interdisciplinary courses using my complex and varied background.

This synthesis has led me to be philosophical and reflect on my life experiences, but also to eagerly look beyond mere physical temporality. As I discussed above, my experience has been both “regressive” and “progressive.” I learned in my statistics classes that causality is a fundamental issue, in the sense that we cannot guarantee strong statistical power if we fail to prove a causal relationship. However, there can be “imagined effects” (Solomon, 1994). This begs the question: if imagined effects actually influence certain causes, does this change the traditional concept of the causal

relationship? The first rule of causality, generally speaking, is that a cause must occur before its effect. Outside of statistical causality, there can be uncanny relationships between cause and effect in which the causes themselves are actually influenced by their effects. In a way, the future can affect the present.

This forces me to ask: What is my present moment? Where am I, right now? I discovered this fluidity of temporality while contemplating my *currere*. Maybe, it was not so much “discovered” but meant to be found at some point in my life. My ad hoc philosophy here might be misread as: “Every word has power.” If you say that something will happen in the future, it is likely to occur. However, I am neither religious nor superstitious. I came to this biographical, reflective, ontological, existential, and metaphysical conclusion based on experience. Perhaps, on second thought, my “imagined future” has conditioned the way I have looked at the world and the people around me. I must ask: Have I been conditioned so deeply that I have lost other possible perspectives on this world? The real value of the *currere* method is that I have become more grateful about being in the moment. At the present time, my behavior and intentions have become more meaningful; that is, whatever I do is geared towards my future. My imagined future voicelessly commands reverse causality in temporality. The traditional concept of causality disappears when I think of myself at this moment; that is, time is fluid. The past was once part of the present, as will be the future. The past has obviously shaped me, just as the imagined future has the power to shape me today. In this concept of fluid temporality, the effect can influence the cause; however, we must also remember that the imagined effect may change or at times disappear throughout the course of time.

As Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2008) discussed, the *currere* method allows for “intellectual development in ways that might function self-transformatively” (p. 515). This autobiographical and biographical method of inquiry has given me an invaluable opportunity to consider my present being from both ontological and epistemological perspectives. Thanks to my statistics courses, I know how to run statistical tests, but until now I was not fully able to explain the reasons and intentions behind those figures, charts, and tables. Often, I doubted whether I was on the right track in my research. I was unsatisfied. After studying teacher education for three years at the University of North Texas, socio-cultural constructivism seriously challenged my quantitative perspective on epistemology. Now, I am grateful that I have learned both quantitative and qualitative methodologies that can serve as tools for my research. I will make good use of both as I pursue my research interests and solve my problems.

I have to confess that, in my past, I raced through my life’s events, not really understanding why I was moving so fast. When I was young, I felt I knew where I was and where I wanted to end up, but for the past few years, I did not precisely know where I was on my journey or why I lived this kind of life. There was no such feeling. Consequently, I became a “seize the day” type of person, because I was not sure about tomorrow. I was unconsciously lost, even while I consciously did my best. I truly feel like I’ve matured while writing this idiosyncratic, reflective autobiography. I, as a doctoral student, graduate assistant, and scholar-to-be, am now more aware of the distance between myself and my field of study, as well as between my life events and who I am as a person. Being aware of the unfamiliar concept of temporality and the topsy-turvy relationship between cause and effect, I can now recall the events that shaped me and the second, separate category of events I actually triggered. In the future, there will also be these two different types of events. It sounds thrilling. Let’s move on. Let’s run the course. The present is a historical moment.

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