

Scaffolding and Curriculum Coherence in a Mission-Driven English Program: A Case Study at Handong Global University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines scaffolding practices and curriculum coherence in the level-based English program at Handong Global University (HGU), a Christian institution in South Korea. It seeks to explore how the program is designed and experienced through curriculum documents, faculty perspectives, and student accounts, and to analyze how Christian mission shapes program strengths and areas for refinement. A qualitative case study design was employed, using semi-structured student interviews, faculty conversations, and document analysis. Data were collected from three student interviews, two faculty conversations, and analysis of institutional curriculum documents. The findings show that the program, which comprises English Foundation, English Communication, English Reading and Composition, and English for Academic Purposes functions as a progressive academic pathway to develop academic discourse skills. Scaffolding practices operate within a coherent curriculum structure, while Christian values are enacted through relational pedagogy and faculty care to support intellectual growth and belonging. Areas for improvement include feedback consistency and clearer communication of level progression. The study offers insights for mission-driven institutions that seek to strengthen curriculum coherence and scaffolded English instruction for diverse learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Handong Global University (HGU) is a private Christian institution located in Pohang, South Korea, often described as a model of Christian higher education in the Asian Pacific region (Choi, 2015). The university was founded with a vision to cultivate globally minded graduates who integrate academic excellence, intercultural competence, and Christian character in response to broader pressures of globalization and educational change in South Korean higher education (Choi, 2015; Kim, 2015; Lee, 2025).

The university enrolls students from many linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds (Choi, 2015). This creates a dynamic educational setting. To meet the needs of this diverse community, the Department of Language Education (DLE) at Handong Global University offers a carefully structured English program designed to develop academic communication skills through a progressive sequence of courses. The program includes English Foundation (EF), English Communication (EC), English Reading and Composition (ERC), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

According to internal curriculum documents, these courses are intended to build on one another through systematic development of reading, listening, writing, discussion, and presentation skills. This structure reflects longstanding research in progressive skill development. Such research emphasizes that learning unfolds most effectively when students receive support within what Vygotsky (1978) described as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Later scholars such as Newman and Latifi (2020) and Smolucha and Smolucha (2021) also emphasize that learning is socially mediated and depends on guided participation, intentional modelling, and structured support that help students move from emerging understanding to more independent performance.

The program's design also aligns with contemporary perspectives on scaffolded instruction. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) explain that scaffolding involves temporary, contingent assistance that teachers adjust according to learners' needs and gradually withdraw as competence grows. Building on this concept, Malik (2017) proposed the Two Gradient Model, which highlights the relationship between increasing task complexity and the gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to student.

The Department of Language Education (DLE) curriculum reflects these principles by organizing course content to review, reinforce, and extend essential academic skills at each stage of students' development. Placement procedures that use internal tests and internationally recognized certificates such as IELTS further demonstrate the department's recognition of students' varied linguistic backgrounds and prior learning.

Despite the presence of a detailed written curriculum, little research has examined how students and faculty actually experience and interpret the program's structure. Existing studies in Korean and broader East Asian contexts often focus on challenges associated with English-Medium Instruction (EMI), including student confidence, language anxiety, and the demands of academic literacy (Lei & Hu, 2023; Newman & Latifi, 2020). In addition, Ahn (2022) shows that students frequently manage EMI by mixing Korean and English as a coping strategy, which reflects the multilingual realities of classroom interaction. Other scholars highlight institutional pressures to internationalize (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2025), concerns about curriculum coherence (Petraki & Khat, 2020), or tensions between language specialists and content area instructors (Macaro, 2019; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). Additional work explores culturally responsive pedagogy and teacher decision making in diverse classrooms (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2020). However, these studies rarely examine a level-based English program as an integrated system from multiple perspectives, such as curriculum documents, faculty insights, and student experiences.

Beyond these EMI-specific and curriculum-coherence gaps, research on how Christian universities integrate mission-related goals into English education remains limited. Buijs (2023) suggests that Christian institutions often embed spiritual or ethical objectives into communication programs, yet these aims may not always be visible to students or consistently integrated into instruction. Carpenter and Ntarangwi (2015) point out that Christian universities must negotiate the relationship between mission formation and global academic expectations, but little is known about how this negotiation influences the design and implementation of English curricula. However, it remains unclear how scaffolding practices and curriculum coherence are enacted and experienced within a mission-driven, level-based English program, and how Christian identity shapes these processes in practice.

This study responds to these gaps by conducting a qualitative case study of the English program in the Department of Language Education at Handong Global University. Drawing on interviews with students from different linguistic backgrounds, conversations with experienced faculty members, and analysis of curriculum documents, the study explores how the program is structured, how students understand their progression through the levels, and how faculty interpret and apply scaffolded instruction. Specifically, this study aims to examine how scaffolding practices and curriculum coherence are designed and experienced across levels, and to analyze how the university's Christian mission shapes the program's strengths and areas for continued development.

To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students, faculty, and curriculum documents describe the English program's scaffolding practices and progression across levels as a coherent academic pathway?
2. How does the university's Christian mission shape the program's learning culture, pedagogical practices, and areas for improvement?

By addressing these questions, the study offers a comprehensive view of a multilingual English program situated within a mission-driven university setting. The findings provide constructive insights for institutions that aim to refine progressive English curricula, support diverse learners, and strengthen the connection between academic English instruction and broader educational values.

Furthermore, this research contributes to qualitative understandings of how structured EFL programs function and are experienced. It highlights components and characteristics involved in integrating both academic and specific communication skills, like faith-based communication, within a comprehensive language curriculum from multiple point of view. Thus, the study serves as a case for universities in similar EFL contexts that are grappling with increasingly diverse student populations and the evolving demands of global communication (Lee, 2025; Buijs, 2023; Alshehri et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding a level-based English program requires a theoretical grounding in how learners develop academic skills and how instructional support facilitates that development. Sociocultural theory provides the foundation for this study. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning first emerges through social interaction with more knowledgeable others before becoming internalized as independent performance. This developmental process takes place within the Zone of Proximal Development, the space where learners can succeed with appropriate support.

Newman and Latifi (2020) emphasize that this co-constructed process positions instruction, interaction, and collaboration as central to academic development. Similarly,

Smolucha and Smolucha (2021) highlight that learning is socially mediated and dependent on intentional modelling, guided participation, and opportunities for learners to assume increasing responsibility.

Scaffolding theory extends these sociocultural ideas by explaining how instructional support allows learners to perform complex tasks they cannot yet complete alone. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) describe scaffolding as contingent, temporary assistance that teachers adjust according to learners' needs and gradually withdraw as competence develops. Building on this, Malik (2017) introduced the Two Gradient Model, which conceptualizes learning as a balance between increasing task complexity and the gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to student. When these gradients are aligned, learners progress smoothly; when they diverge, learners may experience difficulty, especially at transition points between curricular levels. Although these two models share a common sociocultural foundation, they differ in analytic emphasis. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) centre the adult-learner dyad and the gradual withdrawal of assistance as a single continuum, without specifying how task difficulty itself should be sequenced. Malik's (2017) Two Gradient Model addresses this gap by treating complexity and responsibility as two separate, co-varying dimensions, which makes it better suited to institutional, multi-level programs of the kind examined in this study. Neither model, however, fully specifies how learners perceive or respond to misalignment between these gradients at transition points, a tension this study's findings return to.

Research further shows that academic tasks become more cognitively demanding as learners advance. Hence, insufficient scaffolding can result in cognitive overload and delay learners' writing development. Jiang and Kalyuga (2022) found that collaborative instructional design reduced cognitive load and improved writing performance. This indicates that learners benefit from structured, well-designed instructional sequences during demanding writing tasks. Nazerian, Abbasian, and Mohseni (2021) similarly argue that ZPD-aligned support enhances accuracy in writing tasks. Teacher support also plays a crucial role in sustaining learner engagement and reducing anxiety during complex academic work, as shown in broader EFL research on scaffolding and instructional facilitation. Corrective feedback practices can strengthen accuracy and confidence when systematically integrated into writing instruction (Zarei et al., 2020).

A second area of research concerns curriculum coherence and fidelity of implementation. Coherent programs exhibit alignment among objectives, instruction, materials, and assessments. Curriculum research indicates that strong alignment and visible learning trajectories improve student progression by helping learners understand how each course builds on the previous one (Wijngaards de Meij & Merx, 2018). Fidelity of implementation also shapes curriculum effectiveness. Yazıcılar and Nalbantoğlu (2022) explain that instructors frequently adapt materials to meet learner needs. Although thoughtful adaptation can strengthen instruction, excessive variation may produce inconsistencies across course sections and disrupt the intended developmental sequence.

Other research provides additional insight into designing programs for multilingual learners. Petraki and Khat (2020) identify common challenges in aligning disciplinary expectations with language development in multilingual higher education settings. Kuhn and Albers (2021) emphasize the necessity of early and consistent academic literacy support for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Tedick and Young (2017) highlight that learners' varied linguistic backgrounds shape their responses to instruction, which means that English programs must anticipate wide differences in proficiency and prior learning. Collectively,

these studies underscore the importance of predictable progression, explicit expectations, and sustained support in level-based programs.

Recent work also shows that unequal access to institutional technologies can influence multilingual learners' autonomy and academic engagement, suggesting the need for digital literacy support in higher education (Jeong, 2017; Liu, 2023). In addition, motivation shapes how multilingual learners engage with English programs. Azizi et al. (2020) found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations contribute to EFL learners' academic outcomes, indicating the value of transparent learning goals.

The broader context of English as medium instruction (EMI) also influences program design. In South Korea and across East Asia, EMI has expanded rapidly as universities seek to globalize (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2025). However, this expansion presents challenges. Ahn (2022) reports that students frequently mix Korean and English in EMI courses as a functional coping strategy, while Lei and Hu (2023) note that learners often struggle with academic literacy demands, including listening, comprehension, and the production of discipline-specific writing. These challenges highlight the essential role of academic English programs in supporting students who must operate in English-medium environments.

Institutional dynamics further shape EMI practice. Macaro (2019) and Macaro and Aizawa (2024) note tensions between content specialists and language instructors regarding expectations for student proficiency. Lasagabaster (2022) argues that effective EMI teaching, particularly in multilingual and multicultural settings, requires sustained professional development and institutional support. Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2020) show that teachers' approaches to student diversity shape how they provide cultural and instructional support. This highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse EFL classrooms.

Faith-based universities represent a particular kind of multilingual educational context in which scaffolding and coherence are not purely academic constructs. Carpenter and Ntarangwi (2015) explain that Christian institutions often seek to integrate ethical, spiritual, or mission-centered goals into academic instruction, which suggests that the "more knowledgeable other" in Vygotsky's (1978) model may also carry a relational or pastoral function, extending scaffolding into the affective and moral domain. Similarly, Buijs (2023) argues that such institutions may embed forms of agapeic wisdom or moral formation into their curricula, an implicit form of coherence that runs alongside the explicit, document-based coherence emphasized in curriculum alignment research (Wijngaards de Meij & Merx, 2018). Despite this conceptual overlap, there is limited research examining how mission-centered identity interacts with, rather than stands apart from, scaffolding and curriculum coherence, or how these values shape student experiences within level-based English programs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applied a qualitative research design using an interpretivist approach consistent with a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivism emphasizes that individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experiences; therefore, qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for examining how students and faculty understand an academic program involving complex learning processes, instructional interactions, and developmental expectations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021).

The purpose of this study is not to generalize statistically but to understand in depth how the English program of the Department of Language Education at Handong Global University is designed, implemented, and experienced by those who participate in it. A single-

case study design was appropriate because the English program represents a bounded system with a defined curriculum, a specific set of instructional practices, and a clearly identified population of students and faculty. The case was selected because the program represents a clearly bounded system in which curriculum structure, instructional scaffolding, and institutional mission are intentionally interconnected. Therefore, the program was suitable for in-depth examination of how pedagogical design and mission-driven identity operate together. A case study allows for detailed examination of how curriculum documents, classroom practices, and student experiences interact within a particular institutional setting.

Data were collected from three primary sources. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three students who had taken different combinations of English Foundation (EF), English Communication (EC), English Reading and Composition (ERC), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Purposive sampling ensured that participants represented different linguistic backgrounds and experiences within the program. The final sample included one Korean student, one Indonesian student, and one Nepali student, allowing the study to capture variation in how students understood level progression, instructional support, and academic expectations. The final sample included one Korean student, one Indonesian student, and one Nepali student, allowing the study to capture variation in how students understood level progression, instructional support, and academic expectations. This sample of three students is small and was not intended to be statistically representative; it was designed to generate an in-depth, context-rich understanding consistent with the case study's interpretivist aims, and the findings should be read as illustrative rather than generalizable.

Second, explanatory conversations were conducted with two experienced faculty members from the Department of Language Education. These instructors have taught across multiple levels of the program and have been involved in discussions related to curriculum design. Their insights provided essential context for understanding the intended structure of the program, the rationale behind its developmental sequence, and their interpretations of student readiness and classroom challenges.

Third, a systematic document analysis was conducted using materials such as the Department of Language Education meta curriculum and course syllabi. These documents provided information about the planned structure of the program, stated learning outcomes, and the designed progression of academic skills.

To guide data collection and ensure alignment with the theoretical framework, the study used a structured guideline built around four major variables. These variables represent the central theoretical constructs informing this study: scaffolding theory, the Two Gradient Model, curriculum coherence, and Christian mission integration. Each variable includes dimensions and indicators that directed attention to specific features within the interviews, faculty conversations, and documents. The data collection guideline is described in Table 1.

This framework structured the analysis by ensuring that data collected from all sources were interpreted through the main theoretical lenses of the study. The variables helped focus attention on how scaffolding was experienced, how progression was perceived, how the curriculum functioned as a coherent system, and how institutional mission was enacted in pedagogical practice and learning culture.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, which offers a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. This process was further guided by the clarifications and practical recommendations outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020), who emphasize transparency, coherence, and systematic engagement with the dataset.

Table 1. Framework for Data Collection and Analysis

Variables	Dimensions	Indicators
Scaffolding	modelling, participation, affective support	guided feedback, evidence of teacher modelling, step-by-step guidance, clarity of instructions, guided practice, emotional comfort, student statements about feedback (presence or absence), and descriptions of supportive or challenging classroom environments
Two Gradient Model	task complexity, progression, independence, transitions between levels	student descriptions of changes in difficulty, readiness for higher tasks, perceived “jumps” between levels, independence in completing assignments, confidence with academic tasks, and comments about placement tests and starting points
Curriculum coherence	written progression, alignment between levels, instructor consistency, fidelity of implementation	document statements about links between levels, student ability to recognize how levels relate, reports of variation across instructors, consistency in learning outcomes, clarity of program goals, and evidence of cohesion or fragmentation
Christian mission integration	relational pedagogy, faith-informed purposes, community care practices, mission visibility in curriculum and instruction	references to Christian identity in interviews, student descriptions of faith-shaped classroom climate, faculty articulation of mission in teaching goals, practices supporting spiritual formation, and integration of institutional values in learning spaces

The researcher began with familiarization by repeatedly reading transcripts, faculty notes, and institutional documents to gain an initial sense of patterns within the data. In the second phase, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful units relevant to the focus of the study. These codes were then organized into potential themes that reflected the four analytic variables used in the study’s framework. While the four-variable framework provided deductive orientation during initial coding, themes were refined inductively to ensure that participant experiences not fully anticipated by the framework were also represented.

Themes were reviewed and refined against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and accurate representation of participant experiences. Each theme was subsequently defined and named to clarify its conceptual boundaries and its contribution to the overall interpretation. In the final phase, the analytic narrative was produced by integrating student accounts, faculty intentions, and curriculum structures.

Through triangulation across interviews, documents, and curriculum materials, this systematic thematic analysis allowed for a holistic examination of how the program’s design, instructional practices, student experiences, and mission-driven identity are interconnected. The four-variable framework provided theoretical consistency and ensured clear alignment between the literature review, findings, and discussion.

Researcher Positionality

As an English lecturer at Jakarta International University (JIU), a Christian institution in Indonesia with academic connections to Handong Global University, the researcher approached this study as a connected but external observer. The researcher participated in an academic exchange fellowship at HGU, which provided opportunities to observe institutional practices and engage with faculty members. While this affiliation facilitated

access and contextual understanding, it also required careful reflexivity to avoid uncritical interpretation. In particular, the researcher's institutional affiliation with a partner Christian university may have encouraged participants to speak more favourably about HGU's Christian character than they would have with an unaffiliated researcher, and faculty participants may have felt some collegial obligation to present the program's design in a positive light. To address this, the researcher relied on triangulation across student interviews, faculty conversations, and document analysis, and prioritized participants' own perspectives during thematic analysis. Attention was given to identifying both strengths and areas for improvement within the program to ensure balanced and analytically grounded interpretation.

FINDINGS

This study analyzed student interviews, faculty perspectives, and curriculum documents to understand a systematized English program in a Christian university context. Guided by the four analytic variables of scaffolding, progression (Two Gradient Model), curriculum coherence, and Christian mission integration, the findings reveal a program characterized by structured academic development and mission-shaped pedagogical practices. Across sources, participants described a program that has a clear academic structure, strong instructional support, and increasing academic demands across levels. Students reported meaningful development in academic communication as they moved through the pathway. Faculty accounts and curriculum documents confirmed that the program is designed in stages, with repeated practice of academic discourse skills. Participants also highlighted the Christian character of the university as an experienced reality in classroom relationships, support for students, and learning spaces oriented toward encounter and holistic wellbeing. The findings are organized into three themes.

Theme 1: Coherent Academic Discourse Pathway in the DLE Program

Curriculum documents and faculty accounts show that the English program is designed as a systematic pathway for academic discourse development. The DLE meta curriculum defines the mission of the program as developing students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes for English academic discourse. The curriculum expresses this aim in the motto of shaping students who are "clear, correct, and confident" communicators (DLE Meta Curriculum, 2019).

From a curriculum coherence perspective, the Academic Discourse Model (ADM) functions as a stable structural backbone that links levels together. The ADM is described as a stable discourse backbone for the whole program rather than a one-time concept. The model is summarized as introduction, relevant information, and conclusion. The curriculum also explains the model with the common phrasing, "tell them what you are going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them." The document emphasizes that students may understand this structure in theory, yet they need continuous guided practice to apply it consistently in speaking and writing. As a result, ADM-based tasks appear across basic, intermediate, and advanced courses.

The scope-and-sequence is arranged through a review–reinforce–extend logic across EF (English Foundation), EC (English Communication), ERC (English Reading and Composition), and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). Foundational discourse skills are reviewed and practiced first. Middle levels strengthen the same skills through broader genres and argumentation. Advanced levels expand those skills into research-based and discipline-oriented academic communication. Faculty participants described ADM as a shared spine that

supports continuity from one level to another, while instructors still adjust tasks to match students' proficiency and disciplinary needs. Student narratives match this design. Students reported recurring discourse patterns across levels, while tasks became more academic and more complex over time. These descriptions indicate visible alignment between written curriculum, instructional practice, and perceived student progression, suggesting strong structural coherence across the program.

Theme 2: Supportive Scaffolding and Progressive Independence Across Levels

Students consistently described learning environments as supportive, structured, and guided toward participation. They emphasized that professors were approachable and attentive to students' needs. A Korean student reported that he felt nervous at first, but active participation became easier after he experienced the welcoming class atmosphere and respectful responses to mistakes. A Nepali student recalled feeling intimidated during her first required course, yet she emphasized that professors encouraged participation and treated mistakes as part of learning. As she put it, "there is no space for to make mistakes and I had bad experience," though "my team professor... helped me to understand the materials for that class." These accounts reflect affective scaffolding, where emotional safety supports cognitive risk-taking and engagement.

Faculty participants confirmed that modelling and guided participation are key instructional practices. One professor explained that meaningful academic discussions do not emerge automatically for multilingual students. He created structured discussion reports that required students to summarize readings, offer reflections, and generate questions. Students described these step-by-step formats as helpful, because they reduced pressure and supported gradual entry into academic speaking, presentations, and writing. One Korean student pointed to reading as especially useful for this gradual entry, recalling that "reading a novel, in particular, was a great help." This gradual increase in task complexity alongside structured support reflects the alignment described in the Two Gradient Model.

Feedback appeared as another important form of guidance. Students valued detailed feedback because it clarified weaknesses and supported improvement. Some students also noticed uneven feedback practices across sections. The Nepali student described an experience where an essay received no comments, which made improvement goals unclear. These accounts suggest that instructional support is strong overall, while feedback practices vary among sections. This inconsistency appeared to be tied to individual instructor practice rather than a documented departmental standard, suggesting that feedback delivery is not yet governed by a shared protocol across sections. Because clear, timely feedback is central to scaffolded writing development, this variation represents a concrete area where the program's structural coherence has not yet been matched by consistent implementation.

Students also described increasing academic difficulty across levels. Lower levels were described as more guided with clear task boundaries. Higher levels required students to prepare more independently, develop arguments, respond critically to readings, and handle research-oriented presentations and writing. The Indonesian student described English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as especially valuable for academic speaking and research writing. He explained that EAP expects students to take responsibility for argument development, research tasks, and formal presentations. Students understood rising difficulty as meaningful preparation for academic study and academic identity growth. However, when transitions were not clearly communicated, some students experienced the shift to advanced levels as a sharp jump rather than a smooth gradient. This suggests partial misalignment in perceived progression.

Placement test procedures influenced how students entered the level system and how they experienced progression. One student reported taking the internal placement test without full seriousness, which later affected how well the assigned level matched perceived readiness. Two students, the Indonesian and Nepali participants, entered directly into advanced courses through internationally recognized English certificates, such as IELTS. This allowed them to bypass lower levels. These different entry routes show that placement is a key gate into the level-based pathway and shapes students' sense of preparedness, continuity, and difficulty.

Theme 3: Curriculum Alignment Enacted Within Mission-Driven Pedagogy

Students generally perceived the curriculum as systematic and purposeful. They recognized clear academic goals and repeated practice across levels. Students also reported variation across instructors, mainly in EAP. Some instructors gave stronger emphasis to research writing, while others placed greater emphasis on discussion or speech. Students appreciated instructors' expertise and did not view these differences negatively. Their accounts nevertheless indicate an opportunity to strengthen alignment across sections so that core advanced outcomes remain consistently articulated.

Beyond structural coherence, participants described the university's Christian mission as shaping the relational and pedagogical culture of the program. Christian identity became most visible through professors' care for students, especially international learners, who are often a minority within classes dominated by Korean students. One professor explicitly affirmed that he gives greater attention to international students for this reason. Students described this care through kindness, patience, respect for mistakes, and sincere encouragement. These relational practices functioned as mission-informed pedagogical support that reinforced students' sense of belonging and academic confidence.

Students from different national backgrounds interpreted this care in distinct but complementary ways. The Nepali student contrasted her previous secular schooling experience with Handong Global University (HGU) explaining that teachers in her former context were less understanding of mistakes, whereas at HGU she experienced encouragement rather than humiliation. The Indonesian student explained that he chose HGU specifically because of its Christian identity. These narratives show that Christian character functions both as a reason for university choice and as a lived classroom experience.

Participants also linked Christian values to loyalty and stability in departmental life. They pointed to long faculty tenures, such as approximately twelve years and eight years, as visible evidence of committed service. This continuity was interpreted as reflecting a shared vision and long-term dedication within the department.

Christian values were also visible in concrete community practices and the broader learning ecology. Every Sunday, a professor provides transportation for students to attend church. Students experienced this not as an obligation but as a natural act of care. Participants also observed that Nepali students and students from Laos receive particular encouragement in both academic adjustment and spiritual life.

In addition, students described facilities designed to support encounter and collaborative learning. Each floor features corner study rooms with a central table surrounded by chairs, a small cupboard containing various books, and a whiteboard. The visibility of these rooms, located prominently near stairways and accessible throughout the day, was perceived as inviting and supportive. Additional learning spaces, such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) labs, interpretation labs, Graduate School of Interpretation and

Translation (GSIT) seminar rooms, and conference rooms, typically arrange seating around shared tables that encourage discussion. On the ground floor, a reading corner provides academic books across disciplines as well as materials related to personal development and Christian values.

Within these shared spaces, boards display announcements about free breakfast distributions, tutoring schedules, and other campus resources. Students interpreted these everyday wellbeing initiatives as signs of holistic concern consistent with Christian character. Rather than being confined to formal religious instruction, Christian mission appeared embedded in everyday institutional practices, faculty commitment, community support, and learning environments that promote both academic development and holistic formation.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the design, implementation, and student-faculty experiences of the level-based English program at Handong Global University (HGU), a Christian institution in South Korea. Drawing on sociocultural theory, scaffolding principles, the Two Gradient Model, and curriculum coherence frameworks, the findings reveal a program characterized not only by progressive academic structure but also by mission-informed pedagogical practices. By examining how scaffolding and curriculum coherence operate within a Christian institutional context, this study contributes to understanding how faith-based higher education institutions integrate academic quality with relational and spiritual formation.

The findings strongly align with sociocultural theory, which positions learning as socially mediated and developmentally supported through guided interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Latifi, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Students consistently described instructors as approachable, attentive, and intentional in modeling academic discourse. Structured discussion reports, staged writing assignments, and repeated discourse patterns across levels reflect scaffolding practices consistent with Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), where assistance is contingent and gradually withdrawn as competence increases. Faculty descriptions of increasing task complexity alongside expectations of greater student independence closely mirror Malik's (2017) Two Gradient Model, suggesting that intellectual demand and learner autonomy were intentionally balanced across levels.

Students' recognition of escalating academic challenges further indicates that the gradient of intellectual demand was largely experienced as coherent and developmentally appropriate. The progression from foundational communication tasks to research-based argumentation in advanced courses aligns with the findings of Jiang and Kalyuga's (2022) study that carefully sequenced instruction mitigates cognitive overload in academic writing. Similarly, participants' appreciation for detailed corrective feedback supports Zarei et al.'s (2020) argument that structured feedback enhances learner engagement, accuracy, and confidence. However, students' reports of uneven feedback practices across sections suggest that coherence in implementation does not automatically follow coherence in design. This observation reflects Petraki and Khat's (2020) findings that multilingual learners may perceive fragmentation when instructional expectations vary, even within well-designed programs.

Curriculum documents and faculty insights demonstrate that the Academic Discourse Model (ADM) functions as a structural backbone across levels. The review–reinforce–extend logic embedded within the curriculum aligns with research on visible learning trajectories and curriculum alignment (Wijngaards de Meij & Merx, 2018; Yazıcılar & Nalbantoğlu, 2022). The repetition of discourse structures across courses appears to provide cognitive stability while allowing increasing sophistication. Yet, structural coherence does not automatically translate

into perceived coherence. Some students reported limited awareness of how levels interconnected, particularly when transitioning into advanced EAP courses. This distinction between structural coherence and perceived coherence is significant in multilingual EMI contexts, where transparency of progression can influence learner readiness and confidence (Macaro, 2019; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). Thus, while the program demonstrates strong curricular alignment, clearer communication of developmental logic may further strengthen student transitions.

Beyond structural and instructional considerations, the findings illuminate how Christian mission shapes pedagogical enactment. Christian identity at HGU appears embedded not primarily through explicit doctrinal content but through relational pedagogy, faculty intentionality, and everyday community practices. Faculty members articulated a vision of communication skills as foundational not only for academic success but also for participation in faith-based dialogue and Christian witness. In some instances, speaking skills were described as equipping students to later witness to the Kingdom of God in broader societal contexts. Such framing reflects broader scholarship on Christian higher education, which emphasizes the integration of intellectual development with spiritual vocation (Carpenter & Ntarangwi, 2015; Buijs, 2023).

Importantly, scaffolding within this context appears to function not only as a cognitive support mechanism but also as a relational and ethical practice. Students interpreted patience toward mistakes, encouragement in participation, and intentional attention to international learners as expressions of Christian care. Faculty members explicitly described providing additional support to minority international students as part of their responsibility within a Christian educational environment. This relational orientation suggests that scaffolding practices are intertwined with institutional values of compassion, responsibility, and community formation. In this sense, Christian mission does not operate alongside scaffolding and coherence as a separate institutional layer; rather, it appears to supply the relational conditions, patience, attentiveness, and consistency of care, that make cognitive scaffolding and structural coherence experientially meaningful to students navigating a program in a second or third language.

The integration of mission extends beyond classroom pedagogy into the broader learning ecology. Participants described professors providing transportation for Sunday church attendance, shared study spaces designed to facilitate dialogue, and wellbeing initiatives such as free breakfast distributions. These practices were not perceived as formal religious impositions but as natural extensions of institutional care. Such everyday enactments reflect an educational philosophy that integrates intellectual, relational, and spiritual dimensions of student development. Rather than functioning as an external addition to academic structure, Christian mission appears embedded in communication training, faculty commitment, and institutional design.

The ADM's emphasis on clear, correct, and confident communication also resonates with Christian educational principles that value clarity, integrity, and responsibility in discourse. While the ADM operates as an academic discourse framework, its repeated emphasis on disciplined expression may also reflect broader moral commitments to truthfulness and accountability in communication. This alignment illustrates how academic discourse training and mission-oriented identity can reinforce rather than contradict one another. For other mission-driven institutions, these findings suggest that Christian identity need not be pursued through devotional programming set apart from the academic curriculum. Embedding relational care into everyday scaffolding practices, such as consistent feedback, visible faculty availability to minority and international students, and shared

community spaces, may be a more sustainable way to enact institutional mission than formal doctrinal content alone. Institutions seeking to strengthen curriculum coherence might similarly benefit from pairing structural tools, such as a shared discourse model or explicit scope-and-sequence, with transparent communication of how levels connect, since structural coherence alone does not appear to guarantee that students perceive the program as coherent.

At the same time, the program faces ongoing challenges typical of multilingual English-medium contexts. Variations in instructor emphasis in advanced courses, particularly EAP, repeat broader EMI research which highlight tensions between language specialists and content expectations (Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). Ensuring consistency while preserving instructor expertise remains a delicate balance. Moreover, ongoing discernment regarding the integration of emerging technologies, including AI tools, presents both opportunity and responsibility. As Jeong (2017) and Liu (2023) suggest, digital literacy in EFL contexts requires intentional guidance. In a mission-driven institution, technological integration must also align with ethical and pedagogical commitments, which reflect a broader challenge faced by Christian higher education institutions navigating rapid educational change.

CONCLUSION

This study examined scaffolding practices and curriculum coherence in the level-based English program at Handong Global University (HGU), a Christian institution in South Korea. Drawing on student interviews, faculty perspectives, and curriculum documents, the findings indicate that the program provides a structured progression from foundational communication skills to advanced academic discourse and research-oriented tasks. Scaffolding practices, especially modeling, guided participation, affective support, and feedback, supported students' engagement and helped them develop greater academic independence across levels.

At the same time, the findings suggest that students' perceptions of progression do not always match the program's intended coherence. Clearer communication of level-to-level pathways and stronger consistency in feedback practices may strengthen transitions, particularly into advanced EAP courses. In addition, Christian mission was experienced less through explicit doctrinal instruction and more through relational pedagogy, faculty care, and everyday community practices that supported international students and reinforced a sense of belonging. These mission-informed practices appeared to function alongside instructional scaffolding to shape a supportive learning culture.

This case offers practical insights for mission-driven institutions that seek to strengthen curriculum coherence and to provide scaffolded English instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study drew on a small sample, three students and two faculty members, from a single institution, which limits the transferability of findings and means the results should be read as illustrative rather than representative of the wider program or of other mission-driven institutions. The researcher's own institutional affiliation with a partner Christian university may also have shaped participants' willingness to discuss the program critically. Future research would benefit from larger and more diverse participant samples and from cross-institutional comparative studies examining scaffolding and curriculum coherence across multiple Christian or mission-driven universities. Longitudinal designs could further examine how students' perceptions of coherence and mission integration evolve over time, including how institutions guide ethical and pedagogical use of emerging tools such as AI within mission-informed English programs.

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