**Ontology**

As defined by Crotty (2003), ontology is concerned with “what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure or reality as such” (p.10).  As researchers it is important to consider the nature of the social phenomena under investigation in order to understand how it may be investigated.  Thus, researchers must consider such questions as “is social reality external to the individual… or is it a product of individual consciousness? Is reality objective in nature, or the result of individual cognition?” (Cohen & Manion, 1989, p.6). The two opposite sides reflected in these questions relate to the ontological positions of realism – the belief that a single reality exists independently of individuals perceptions of it – on one end, and relativism – the belief that reality is a subjective experience and only exists in one’s mind – on the other.

Considering the issues under investigation in this study it is the researcher’s belief the notion of core competencies, how they may develop, and how pre-service language teacher education programs can be improved to better prepare Korean public-school secondary language teachers for their job, are subjective in nature.  Although reality may exist external to individuals, how individuals experience that reality is filtered through their own individual mental constructs. Under this assumption, although teachers may face similar situations throughout their teacher education programs and working contexts, reality is experienced on an individual basis.  Thus, various realities exist that are contingent upon individual experiences.  It is with these beliefs that this study embraces a relativist ontology and is based on the following assumptions.

1. Since reality is subjective, investigating social phenomenon requires the researcher access the perceived realities of multiple individuals who have undergone similar experiences in order to understand the individual and shared meanings of those experiences.  In this study data was collected past the point of theoretical saturation from both sample groups. Specifically, data was collected to the point in which no new data seemed to be emerging and additional data was collected beyond this point to ensure that saturation was in fact reached. In the case of in-service teachers’ interviews an additional 5 were conducted past the saturation point (which appeared around 10 interviews) in both stages one and two of data collection. For the teacher educator interviews an additional interviews were conducted past the saturation point (which appeared around 12 interviews). Further details regarding data collection are provided in section 3.3.2.

2. The same social phenomena can be perceived and/or interpreted differently by different individuals at different times.  It was therefore important to ensure that the methods I followed in this study were rigorous and accounted for these possible differences. This is the reason why data was collected from 2 purposive sample groups (in-service teachers, and teacher-educators); to gather insight into how the phenomena under investigation may be interpreted differently by individuals in different positions. Additionally, to account for possible differences in interpretations over time, the primary sample group of in-service teachers participated in initial interviews in stage 1 and follow up interviews a year later in stage 2 which revisited and expanded on the stage one interview schedule. Further details of how this was done are described in the research design section.

3.  Observations of humans in any capacity are subjective in nature.  It is therefore important to acknowledge that the researcher also brought with him his own beliefs, values, and experiences.  Thus, the researcher purposely collected qualitative data from various stakeholder perspectives to be able to understand and represent the phenomena under investigation in a more neutral manner through their own words.

Based on these ontological assumptions the researcher adopted a constructivist-interpretive framework which aims to understand the “world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36) through participants’ “views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p.8).  This research paradigm acknowledges that the social reality teachers are drawing from is self-constructed as they “engage with the world they are interpreting.” (Crotty, 1998, p.54), and the meaning they make of their reality is dependent on the interaction of themselves and their working contexts. As Creswell (2003) explains, within this research paradigm researchers aim to inductively draw out patterns of meanings (rather than beginning with a theory) which is most likely to involve predominantly qualitative data. Since the perspectives gathered in this study were expected to be varied and multiple, research of the phenomena required the collection of data from multiple stakeholders in different positions in order to reduce the bias of a single view and provide thick descriptions (see Geertz, 1973) of the emergent patterns of how the phenomena under investigation were interpreted.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology generally refers to assumptions about knowledge; what it entails and what may be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Bryman, 2008).  More specifically, epistemology is concerned with the assumptions one makes at “the very bases of knowledge – its nature and form, how it can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007 , p.7)). Drawing from the ontological assumptions outlined above the researcher adopted a constructivist-interpretive  epistemological stance which takes the view that “… all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human being and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.” (Crotty, 1998, p.53). Thus, since social reality is experienced by multiple people who may interpret things differently from one another, various viewpoints of a single incident will exist (Mack, 2010).

Under a constructivist-interpretive epistemological perspective, knowledge is grounded in our particular experiences, it is subjectively defined, created by an individual, and tentative in nature and therefore aligns with an ontologically relativist position (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Green, 2010).  As Hiller (2016) explains, assuming a constructivist-interpretive epistemological view treats knowledge as something that is “imbued with our values, local and political, and is thus not universal and not generalizable in the sense that it may readily apply to other agents in alternate situations.” (p. 103). Therefore, it is felt that it is only through the combination of several individual views that a better understanding can be drawn of how certain realities are experienced by subjects, and the inter-subjective shared characteristics of those experiences. Thus, it was the researcher’s priority within this theoretical perspective to understand phenomena, and explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of a wide range of different participants (see Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2007) to allow for others in the field to draw their own implications for their specific context (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, it was also important that I recognized and acknowledged that my own personal background and experiences may shape how I interpret the findings (see Creswell, 2007). Thus, in order to understand the phenomena under investigation and minimize my own personal biases, consistent with Leininger (1985), I set out to "… document and interpret as fully as possible the totality of whatever is being studied in particular contexts from the people's viewpoint or frame of reference." (p.5). This involved collecting data from two different sample groups to gain different perspectives on the issues being explored (data triangulation), collecting data to the point of theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and presenting the findings through the words of the participants.

**Methodology**

The constructivist-interpretive positions outlined above had significant implications for the methodological considerations that went into the design of this study. First, constructivist-interpretive research is focused on the understanding of “the world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36) and works under the assumption that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005, p.12).  As stated by Creswell (2003), researchers working within constructivist-interpretive paradigm often rely upon participants' perspectives of the issues being studied. Thus, this study adopted a methodology that is hermeneutical in nature which took aim at exploring individuals’ constructed reality of their experiences and the meaning they attach to it.  This is illustrated in the data collection and analysis procedures that are described later in this chapter.

When considering the goals of constructivist-interpretive research the emphasis is placed on understanding the meanings that people assign to the phenomena under investigation rather than on providing a causal explanation (see Orlikowski & Barodi, 1991). As Sandberg (2005) posits, social situations can have shared meanings amongst stakeholders and it is “the agreed meaning [which] constitutes the objective, intersubjective reality” (Sandberg, 2005, pp.47-48). Constructivist-interpretive research is therefore concerned with understanding phenomena by investigating how “human beings make individual and/or collective sense of their particular world and engage in situations” (Avenier & Thomas, 2015, p.68). Therefore, this study focused on the understanding of the phenomena being examined through the lived realities of the stakeholders and the shared meanings amongst them.  Thus, data collection strategies were employed that provided insight into participants' lived realities; interviews, and observations.  Interviews allowed the researcher to have a dialogue with the participants where they could share their lived experiences and perspectives on the issues at hand.  Observations provided insight into a more objective reality of what teachers actually do in the classroom as opposed to what they describe themselves as doing, or want others to perceive them as doing (Caldwell & Atwal, 2005).

As the focus of constructivist-interpretive research is making participants' perspectives on the phenomena under study explicit, patterns of meaning are inductively drawn from the formal analysis of the data collected rather than an existing framework being imposed (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2014). This methodological consideration is reflected in the inductive data analysis procedures that were used in this study which are explained in section 3.3.4 in detail. As previously mentioned, the philosophical assumptions outlined in this section underpin the design and empirical procedures of this study. The following sections provide a detailed description of this study’s research context, research design, and data collection and analysis procedures.