

English Fluency as Wind beneath My Children’s Wings: The Imagined and Practiced Value of English Language in Globalizing Korea¹

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ABSTRACT— *In this paper, I argue that English is an important component of “cultural capital” in contemporary Korean society. Whether for practical reasons or not, English proficiency is something an educated Korean must have. Given the perceived importance of English language in Korea, children’s early exposure to English language has become important component of mothers’ “family status production” work. [Papanek 1979] This is especially true for middle, and upper middle class families who either need to constantly affirm their class background, or have desire to climb up the social hierarchy. In this paper, I examine the significance of English proficiency in its relationship with the notions of gender, family, and class in the society. As Koreans society becoming one of the major players in the global society, English language proficiency has also become an important component of Koreans’ global identities.*

Keywords— English fluency, Korea, class, cultural capital, class and education

1. INTRODUCTION

Observers of Korean society and culture tend to agree that English proficiency is more than language competence in today’s Korean society. The huge popularity of English language nurseries and kindergartens, despite of their high costs, is one of the testaments that many Korean parents are enthusiastic over their children’s English proficiency. Recently, most large universities in Korea have opened divisions of undergraduate programs where English is the sole medium of education. These programs sometimes have international students who do not command Korean language. However, even in the case that the entire body of the students are native speakers of Korean, teaching is still conducted in English hoping that the students improve their English while learning their subjects in various fields. Many parents are willing to pay higher tuition to enroll their children in these programs hoping that their college education in English language will enhance their future career competitiveness.

College Students, whether they are in English language programs or not, often spend one or more semesters in English-speaking countries while taking leave of absence from their home institutions primarily to enhance their English fluency. This usually costs a large amount of money due to relatively higher tuition, living costs, and international travel. Students often take part-time jobs to prepare for such study abroad, or, when it is a viable option, ask their parents to shoulder additional financial burden.

Perhaps, or obviously, due to the extra concern and efforts as enlisted above, the overall level of English fluency among Koreans has significantly risen. Many people, including college professors who teach in English, state that their students’ command of English proficiency seems to have improved year by year. Even those many Koreans (probably most Koreans) who do not particularly need English competence in their job environments feel that they should keep improving their English. Quite a few college professors, regardless of their fields of specialization, want to spend their sabbatical years in English-speaking countries when they have children of suitable age for learning colloquial English.

In this paper, I argue that English is an important component of “cultural capital” in contemporary Korean society. Whether for practical reasons or not, English proficiency is something an educated Korean must have. Given the perceived importance of English language in Korea, children’s early exposure to English language has become important component of mothers’ “family status production” work. (Papanek) This is especially true for middle, and upper middle class families who either need to constantly affirm their class background, or have desire to climb up the social hierarchy. In this paper, I examine the significance of English proficiency in its relationship with the notions of gender, family, and

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class in the society. As Koreans society becoming one of the major players in the global society, English language proficiency has also become an important component of Koreans' global identities.

Anthropological fieldwork, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and literature survey was conducted between 2008 and 2014. The author, a mother of two children who attended several different kinds of educational institutions for learning English language, benefitted from her network of mothers, children, and teachers who both formally and informally shared their experiences and thoughts. Interviews with 23 university students were conducted though the research period on their experiences and thoughts on learning English and value of English proficiency in contemporary Korean society.

2. ENGLISH FLUENCY IN GLOBALIZING KOREA: GENDER, FAMILY, AND CLASS

As stated above, English proficiency is one of the key skills in Korea in the era of globalization. Since mid-20th Century, English has been important in Korea with the heavy influence of the United States of America in Korea's political, economic, military, and socio-cultural sectors. Korea's modernization process, especially during the mid- and late 20th century was heavily affected by American culture and society. Significant amount of economic aid, the existence of military bases in several parts of Korea, educational system which has been influenced by American education ideology and system both directly and indirectly are just some pieces of the reasons why many Koreans think Korea's modernization as a process of Westernization (and perhaps, Americanization). The fact that a significant number of university faculty at Korea's institutions of higher education received their higher degrees from US universities also affected how Koreans perceived English language and American culture as important component of modernization and development.²

With globalization, which enabled more frequent and faster interaction with the US and other countries using English as the predominantly adopted language of communication (especially given the fact that English is the most popular language of communication on the Internet), many Koreans now feel that the language's importance has gotten even more critical in career and life in general. To survive and succeed in this environment, Koreans have increasingly invested in enhancing their English proficiency. Recently acquired affluence has enabled parents to invest more for the children's English education. This trend is even more prominent among middle and upper middle class Korean families.

Mothers (housewives) in these middle and upper middle families find it important for their children to acquire English proficiency not only for the children's success in career but also the welfare of the family as a whole. Borrowing Hanna Papanek[1979]'s term, English fluency of the children is part of the "family status production work" in contemporary Korean society.³ English language, due to its imagined and practiced values, is also a clear marker of "distinction (see Bourdieu[1984])" in contemporary Korean society.

3. "ENGLISH DIVIDE" IN TODAY'S KOREAN SOCIETY

As in "digital divide" (the unequal access to information and communication technology being one of the markers that divided members of society), the term "English divide" has been used in recent years to bring attention to the reality that early exposure to spoken English is often affected by the class backgrounds of the children. Given the high tuition at English language educational institutions (kindergarten, private academies, international secondary schools and college programs to name a few), and the even higher cost of sending students to English speaking countries, "English divide" is indeed present in today's Korean society. It is often found not only among classes, but between larger cities and other parts of Korea. Children who have parents (even one of the parents) who can accompany with them to English speaking countries (either from their financial resources, or job placements) have clear advantage in the race for English proficiency. Parents' possession of information and knowledge regarding their children's English education opportunities is also an important factor in this regard. In fact, these information and knowledge is part of the parents' "cultural capital." Generational difference is also a factor in English divide. Most Koreans in their 30s or older did not have the opportunity to be exposed to English speaking environment in their childhood. This English divide gives many Koreans reasons for anxiety and frustration, since the divide is not very easy to cross or overcome. Although some people argue that such exposure can be made by watching education programs on television, or relevant Internet websites many parents feel that direct communication with native speakers of English is the best way to enhance English fluency. Some parents often express their despair and anger when they feel that their own children are behind the starting line by not being able to attend English language kindergartens. Many Korean parents believe that children in their kindergarten or in lower grades in elementary schools are at their optimal age to learn spoken English, because they think early education will give them native, or near native proficiency. Children of that age group are less pressured by studying other subjects such as math and have more time to learn English as well, some parents also note.

² For additional case studies on this, see Nam (2012), Kim (2012), Yang Yeongkyun (2011), and Yang Yongseok (2011) .

³ For a case of professional women's family status production work in Taiwan, see Bak[1994]. In this case children's academic performance (including their English fluency) was one of the main concerns of the professional working mothers.

4. CHILDREN'S ENGLISH EDUCATION AS MOTHERS' FAMILY STATUS PRODUCTION WORK

For the reasons stated above, mothers are quite anxious to make sure that their children's English is fluent. As Hanna Papanek eloquently explained in her paper on "Family Status Production: The "Work" and "Non-Work" of Women [1979]," "family status production work" is what the housewives do to (re)produce the families' status especially among the middle and upper middle family households. This include their family's appropriate consumption, tasteful home decoration, offering elegant social parties, observing family rituals (weddings and funerals) properly, among others. As Goffman [1959] showed, presenting the identity of family is carefully constructed with many components, including English language proficiency, that are conceived meaningful. In Korean society, where education is respected and valued for the present and future welfare of the family, children's proper education have been important factors in family status production, and especially the children's English fluency and their competitiveness in global community have become important in this regard recently.

To make their children have the opportunity to enhance their English fluency, mothers try to give them the opportunity to be exposed to English speaking environment. English language kindergarten (although the current law on educational institutions do not allow these institutions to use the term "kindergarten, only recognizing them as "English language academies" they are still called kindergarten, since parents send their kids to attend those institutions as a way of receiving kindergarten education), English immersion elementary schools (for fear of overworking children, this has been banned recently), summer and winter English camps either in Korea or abroad, sending the children to foreign countries (either with the mother or alone) are some of the possible options to be explained in further detail in the following pages of this paper. Since most of the options require significant amount of additional costs, even some middle class housewives find it burdensome to finance their children's English education. Some cut costs in other areas of the household spending, yet others take part-time jobs just for this purpose. Such decision made by mothers to earn extra income for the children's English education can be called as "family status production work" for present and future welfare of the family.

5. "GIREOGI (WILD GEESE)" FAMILIES

Parents' enthusiasm over Children's English proficiency has produced a new form of family living arrangement: Gireogi (Wild Geese) families, where the mother and children live in English-speaking countries, while the father remains in Korea to earn money for the family. In most of these cases, fathers (most of whom are the significant income-earners for the households) are the ones who remain in Korea where their career opportunities are more readily available. Fathers visit the rest of the family only seasonally (hence, the name, "Wild Geese") It is ironical to note that families decide to live oceans apart for the sake of family's better future.

Similar cases have been observed in Hong Kong and Taiwan (more recently in metropolitan areas in China), but there is a significant difference between the cases observed in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and those in Korea: most of the Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese families eventually migrate to those countries, while Korean families tend to come back to Korea. Many unintended, and unexpected problems have been reported as the consequences of having Gireogi family arrangements. Some families suffered excessive financial burden especially during the financial crisis of 2008. The income generators (fathers) in Korea often suffered from being alone in Korea. Poor health of Gireogi fathers has been mentioned as a serious problem in media. Mothers, who have to be the sole parent in a foreign country were often frustrated by the challenges of living in an unfamiliar environment. Mothers bear the daily burden of raising children, communicating with the schools is often a challenge. Some parents and children later found out that their extended separation have resulted in a significant cultural and generational gap in the families. There are several culturally important issues in the context of Gireogi families. These are helpful in understanding the choice of Gireogi families: they are, namely, 1) importance of education, 2) sacrificing present comfort for future success, 3) husband and wife may live separately (oceans apart) if it's for children's better future, 4) parents spend the bulk of their family income for children's English, rather than saving it for their own retirement. Even with the potential problems as mentioned above, many parents said that even in the case that the children do not perform well in education in those countries, at least their English will improve.

In Gireogi arrangements, families separate (temporarily) to enhance the children's chance of success in the future. They may separate for two years or for much longer period. The period of two years is considered by many families as the minimum period necessary for the children to acquire near-native fluency of English language. Some families decide to maintain such arrangement much longer. They may wait until the children enter college in their country of residence. There have been cases where the family never reunited. In some cases the parent who stayed in Korea later retired and joined the rest of the family, thereby producing the end result of whole family migrating to the country where part of the family initially moved to for education.

6. STUDY ABROAD AT AN EARLY AGE

For those families who do not want to, or are not able to, take the Gireogi family options, sending their children only to English speaking countries to attend schools is another method of giving their children the opportunity to significantly

enhance their English proficiency. The length of the children's study abroad may be anywhere from several months to over 10 years. The duration of stay is determined by various factors, including, the family's financial affordability, the child's progress and needs, parents' view on the relative importance of the child's experience in Korean education and English language improvement. Future career plan for the child is also highly relevant: for careers which need Korean background (for example, developing personal networks through ties such as alumni association), the period of stay is minimized only to acquire the language fluency.

In this kind of arrangements, children go to English-speaking countries by themselves to attend schools. Both temporary (1-2 years, ideally in 4-5th grade in elementary school, when the children have basic aptitude to learn foreign language, while not being burdened by heavy school work yet) and more permanent (going up to college) options are taken. Home stays with local families, dormitories, private residence centers run by Korean immigrants in the host countries accommodate these children during their stay. Living far from parents posits difficult kind of challenges for those young children. Some students gain the desired English proficiency in addition to the experience of living independently in a foreign country. But not all the children are successful, especially for those children who had been pampered by their mothers until the time of their departure from Korea. Many of the problems associated with Gireogi families can be found in this arrangement, as well. Some students have difficulty when they come back to Korea and try to readapt to Korea's rigorous and competitive education system. Anticipating these problems, some children refuse and protest to their parents' decision to take them back to Korea. Some even decide to go back when they fail to readjust to Korean system after their return.

7. ENGLISH-LANGUAGE KINDERGARTENS, PRIVATE LANGUAGE ACADEMIES, ENGLISH CAMPS (DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN)

Many families, especially those who can afford to, opt for English-language kindergartens for their children hoping that their children become bilingual. These kindergartens often have native speakers of English language along with Korean teachers who can command English but not at native level. According to the current Korean law, these are not classified as kindergartens, but are private academies. However, for many parents, these are regarded as better options compared to the regular kindergartens in Korea because they think the children can acquire both kindergarten education and English proficiency.

The tuition for sending a child to one of those English-language kindergartens is much higher than ordinary types. Depending on the geographical location and the prestige and reputation of the kindergarten, monthly tuition ranges from 700,000 won to nearly 1,800,000 won. Other extra charges such as meal, snack, supplies, school bus transportation may be added to the regular monthly tuition. Regular Korean-language kindergartens charge from about 200,000 won to 400,000 won depending on whether they are public or private. As the welfare budget increases for the pre-school children (also as the government promotes childbirth in recent years by giving financial supports to parents who have young children), many kids are supported by government to pay for their kindergarten education. However, English-language kindergartens do not have tuition waiver program for less privileged children. Even with the much higher costs of English-language kindergartens many parents choose them because they fear that their children may fall behind if they did not have the opportunity to start early in learning English. This is especially true since English is considered as one of three most important subjects at secondary schools (the other two are mathematics and Korean) to be tested in the nationwide college entrance examination. Some parents, especially those who do not speak English fluently, even hire private tutors to help their kindergarteners' English homework.

Attending summer camps in English-speaking countries, including US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, is also popular among children of middle and upper middle class family. Some parents choose camps in the Philippines as less expensive options. Korean universities also open English camps during summer and winter recess with native speakers of English as teachers, while undergraduate students majoring English as tutors. Getting children enrolled in these camps (both domestic and international) can cost much, but taken as alternatives to Gireogi family arrangements or children-only study abroad. Some art studios and children's sports centers also offer their lessons in English hoping that this will attract more students by luring parents who want to catch two birds with one stone.

Most of the mothers I met for this research told me that they did not have the opportunity to learn colloquial English effectively. They think this set them back in their careers and other areas. They did not want to inherit this to their children. They are not the only Koreans who believe that English fluency is one of the surest investments for the better future of the children. Children's English fluency also shows the family's socioeconomic status. According to what many parents repeatedly told me, being fluent in foreign language in early childhood is thought to be important, because this helps them to speak the language with native-, or near-native level fluency.

8. GENDER, FAMILY, CLASS, AND GLOBALIZATION

In this paper I have tried to illuminate, with many examples, how strong Koreans' yearning is in participating in the globally mobile elite community. In this context, one of the most obvious ways to achieve it, at least in many Korean parents' eyes, is to be fluent in English. In fact, for them, Korea is too small and overly competitive for their children's future. Globalization is part of everyday conversation among many parents in Korean society. They are clearly aware that

the era their children will be living in is definitely a globalized world where their children's career will not, and should not, be limited within Korea. Especially for Koreans, many of them argue, globalization is highly relevant, because Korea itself is not a large enough country which can survive on its own market. When I reminded that, even in globalized Korea, not all Koreans need to command high level of English proficiency, and there will be many sectors in the job market where they will not need to use English, many parents told me that being able to command English, the global language will be an important part of general intellectual competence. Investing in children's education is the surest way of enhancing their chance for success, and even the brighter future of the children, they argued. Surely, it seems that English fluency is part of the cultural capital, and the means of practical achievement at the same time. It may be inevitable that the mothers (and fathers, even though the latter may not as vocal as their spouses) choose to do their best in ensuring their children's English fluency is at a very high level.

Heavily investing in children's English education is not limited to those who can afford it. Some mothers take part-time jobs as cashiers or domestic helpers to pay for their children's English education. Some households without their own houses (a significant marker of a household's financial condition in today's Korean society) still spend a significant portion of their income for this, as well. This may lead to a new phenomenon, called "education poor", a term newly coined by Korean mass media, meaning "the parents' generation who spend most of their family's income to finance children's education (often paying for private education including English learning), and not reserving enough for their own retirement. "Education poor" may put more burden on Korea's already precarious social welfare system, because the children's generation are not likely to finance their parents' retirement years, as it was the case in the past. Mass media, and the government have been sending out warning messages to the parents that the parents should use up the family savings for children's education, because the retirement period is much longer than it was in the past, and the parents should not expect their children will take care of them. The society has changed, as the government and the media point out. However, the enthusiasm of the parents over the children's English learning seems to be as high as ever. English fluency is, indeed a significant part of their family's cultural capital, and especially the mothers' efforts to enhance their children's competence in that regard is an important part of their "family status production."

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