

Ideologies of English in the South Korean “English Immersion” Debate

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1. Introduction

As a country where English is used as a foreign language, South Korea has become one of the largest consumers of English with the English education market estimated at over 10 billion dollars a year (“Private language schools hail new English education scheme,” 2008). This English frenzy of South Koreans has even led to recent claims that Korea is increasingly heading towards a sociolinguistic transformation from Korean monolingualism to a developing Korean-English bilingualism (J. S. Lee, 2006). While such extreme claims may yet be contestable, it is still undeniable that English maintains a privileged status in Korea.

To fully understand the process by which the linguistic and cultural hegemony of English has become so pervasive at all levels of Korean society, this paper seeks to investigate a specific context: the new South Korean president’s recent proposal calling for English immersion in public schools. Although the plan was eventually withdrawn due to intense public opposition, the debate provides a rich site for studying the ideological process of reproducing the hegemonic status of English in Korea (Blommaert, 1999).

One major goal of this paper is to thus deconstruct the naturalized assumptions of English embedded within Korean society and reveal ways in which ideologies related to English are imposed on or appropriated by Korea’s language policies, academia, and the media. In order to do so, I will examine two major fields: first, political and intellectual discourses surrounding the policy proposal; and second, public debates around the language policy represented through print media. By discussing the representations of English across different discourse genres, I intend to illustrate how language ideologies surrounding English are locally reproduced and how the discursive output of these ideologies contributes to reinforce the hegemony of English in South Korea.

2. Language ideology approach and English in Korea

According to Silverstein (1979), language ideologies are “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (p. 193). From this viewpoint, how linguistic actors interpret or conceptualize the relationship between language and its use in social contexts is considered as a significant mechanism in the maintenance and innovation of linguistic structure, and as a medium that attaches power and sociocultural meanings to forms of language. Language ideologies, in short, act as a window through which one can discover the reflexive relationship between language and society.

This approach based on language ideology is particularly illuminating in investigating the status and social meaning of English in South Korea. Whereas research on English and its influence in postcolonial countries has focused on the observable uses of the language (e.g., code-switching, Englishization, hybrid linguistic forms), it is problematic to equally apply such indicators to the Korean context (J. S. Park, 2004). The main reason is that despite the strong presence of English across education, advertising, and popular culture, Korea still remains a highly homogenous, monolingual nation, and English remains a foreign language rarely used in Korean’s daily lives (O. K. Yoo, 2005). Rather than for actual, everyday use, however, English in Korea is consumed as a

symbolic measure of one's competence and is associated with job success, social mobility, and international competitiveness (Koo, 2007; Yim, 2007). English proficiency is a crucial asset in order to obtain admission to elite schools and highly-desired jobs in Korean corporations like Samsung and Hyundai ("Yengeka kwuklyekita," 2006), even if English, in fact, may never be used upon entrance. So eager are the Korean people for English education that 15,237 youngsters were sent abroad in 2007 to study English ("Overseas elementary students double," 2008), and the recent increase in *kirogi*¹ families also reflects the influence of English in Korea. That the repercussions English has within Korean society are more social than merely linguistic requires an approach that captures this complex reality. In this sense, language ideology offers a useful framework in materializing the dynamics between perceptions of English and specific social actions in Korea as well as the local processes that contribute to the hegemony of English.

In this study, a discussion of ideologies of English in Korea will be through a language policy debate that took place in early 2008. The debate served as a forum where overt metalinguistic statements about English language in Korean society were constituted, exchanged, and contested. By exploring how the policy was presented to the public, this paper seeks to discover the reproduction and manipulation processes of language ideology across different linguistic actors and spaces. The focus will be on *describing* ideological constructions evident in the policy debate, not *evaluating* the particular policy or *suggesting* future language policy reforms. In the next section I will present a detailed account of the policy and its timeline. I will then explain the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis used to investigate the discursive processes through which contestation of ideologies occur.

3. The policy proposal

On December 20, 2007, President Lee Myung Bak of the conservative opposition Grand National Party won by some 5.3 million votes, the biggest victory in the 20-year history of democratic elections in Korea ("Tension mounts in power transition," 2008). As he was a former successful CEO of Engineering and Construction and the mayor of Korea's capital city Seoul, many believed that the newly elected president would realize the second version of the "1960s economic miracle." The election of Lee Myung Bak was a snapshot of Korean's high hopes for the country's economic revival ("Lee MB vows to revitalize economy," 2007).

Upon his inauguration, the new government announced a range of plans to revise current policies, but one of the most hotly discussed was the proposal for reforming English public education. The Lee administration announced its interest in creating Korea as a more English-friendly nation, and the proposed goal was to have every high school graduate conversational in English. As a result, the presidential transition committee of South Korea, on January 23, 2008, unveiled its "English Education Roadmap," a proposal to reform the current teaching system and drastically improve Koreans' English proficiency ("new administration struggling to tackle English divide," 2008). This 4.25-billion-dollar project was to be completed within the next five years, primarily with the motive of increasing national competitiveness, reducing household spending on private education, and promoting educational equality in Korea's society. Originally, Chairwoman Lee Kyung Sook of the presidential transition committee had planned for English content courses to be implemented in public schools—in other words, to teach non-English subjects in English starting from 2010 ("Immersion roadmap," 2008). The committee proposed to start with math, science, and other subjects in which language differences will have less impact on student comprehension. However, within five days of the initial proposal, the committee withdrew the plan for English immersion after critics severely challenged its feasibility, citing the massive budget requirement and lack of proficient teachers.

¹ *Kirogi*, a Korean word which means "wild geese," refers to a split family where the father stays in Korea to financially support the family while the mother and children live abroad for the sake of the children's education (H. Lee, 2008). This new form of family reflects the strong desire of some Koreans to seek after early English education even in the face of risking family dissolution. In fact, *kirogi* families have recently received public attention in connection with social problems such as *kirogi* fathers' suicide, surging divorce rates, and adjustment difficulties of *kirogi* children when returning to Korea.

Faced with strong backlash from the public, the committee revised its plan and proposed that only English language classes would be taught in English. The committee also postponed the policy's actual implementation to 2012 or 2013 ("Immersion roadmap," 2008). Under the plan, the hours allocated for English instruction in elementary schools would be lengthened to three hours a week, which is an hour increase for fifth and sixth graders, and a two-hour increase for third and fourth graders. In addition, the committee also proposed to recruit and retrain 23,000 English-specialized teachers. Among the qualifications for these teachers were that they be a Korean national or foreigner with a TESOL certificate, a teaching license, or at least a masters degree from an English-speaking country. To supply this sudden need for high-quality teachers, the committee posed another solution: to possibly recruit mothers or university students proficient in English as assistant teachers in classrooms.

In this way, the policy developed over time and was becoming more and more specific with detailed structure. Nevertheless, unintended consequences resulted from the policy that further exacerbated public opposition. Following the announcement of the plan, there was a rush of students to private language schools to prepare for the new system. Students living in remote areas moved temporarily to the bigger cities to attend private English institutes for at least a month (The Korea Times, 2008, February 24). Newspapers also constantly displayed disappointing survey results, which often countered the government's motives for pursuing the policy. For instance, in a poll conducted by *The Hankyoreh*, only 8% agreed that the new policy would reduce reliance on private education; meanwhile, 90% answered that private tutoring expenses will rather increase (The Hankyoreh, 2008, February 6). Confronted with these unstable reactions and public anxiety, the government decided to abandon the whole plan after all. Finally on March 20, 2008, President Lee Myung Bak announced that "English immersion education is something we should not carry out and we cannot," but is a matter for the distant future ("No English immersion," 2008).

Even a slight briefing on the time line of the policy proposal reveals the heated nature of the debate it involved. The proposal for English immersion is an interesting case as it is a voluntary invention within Korea's context. For an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country like Korea where English is rarely used in everyday lives, to adopt English immersion into public instruction is quite unusual and extreme. Furthermore, that the government forewent their plans because of pressures coming from below illustrates the intensity of competing discourses existing between the governmental level and public opinions. To sum up, this case is a valuable site to investigate both the macro forces, such as globalization, in shaping a nation's language policy as well as the conflicting images and ideological assumptions attached to English emerging within the local context. Therefore, I will proceed in the next sections to analyze the actual dialogue involved in the debate and attempt to examine how English is actively constructed and reproduced as a powerful language in Korean society.

4. Critical discourse analysis

Aligning with the assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis that "discourse is both socially constitutive as well as socially shaped" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258), the analysis will draw upon Fairclough's (1995) three-tiered framework of description, interpretation, and explanation. According to this perspective, language is viewed as a social practice and a "socially and historically situated mode of action" (p. 131). The dialectical relationship between language and social practice is mediated through discursive activities, in which each discursive event has three dimensions that are interconnected but analytically separable: (a) it is a written or spoken *text*; (b) it is a *discourse practice* that involves an interpretation of the text; and (c) it is a piece of *social practice*.

In this chapter, I will focus on the two dimensions of description and interpretation. Like Fairclough, my starting point will be the text, which is the actual political discourse of President Lee Myung Bak as well as the intellectual discourse surrounding the proposal. Fairclough (2001) saw this first level as the place in which "a close analysis of texts in terms of such features can contribute to our understanding of power relations and ideological process in discourse" (p. 91). In the following sections, I will first present the different themes of ideologies that emerge from the political and intellectual texts of the debate. Then I will move on to present an analysis of print media texts, which

will lead to a more complex picture of the discourses involved in the debate. In this second level of analysis, I will examine how two different newspapers discursively engage with the text. The analysis will illustrate how ideologies identified from the text are taken up in different ways, but despite contrasting political stances, the two newspapers end up supporting similar ideological positions, thereby contributing to the local construction of the hegemony of English.

5. Competing discourses surrounding the policy proposal

The purpose of this section is to examine the complexities of discourses surrounding the policy proposal and disclose in its debates the taken for granted and naturalized everyday practices of English that rests on unexamined assumptions (Fairclough, 1992). To understand what kind of “mobilizations operate under the acts of English” (Pennycook, 2006, p. 112), I will present discourses that most commonly emerge within the newly-elected president’s speech, the presidential transition committee’s proposal, media interviews with professionals and scholars, discussion forums, as well as TV documentaries. All of the extracts are originally in Korean, and as I translated them into English, I have noted important Korean expressions² in parentheses.

5.1. English leads to national competitiveness

One drive behind the presidential transition committee’s proposal for English immersion is clearly demonstrated in the following quote by President-elect Lee Myung-bak: “Generally in the age of globalization (*seykyeyhwa-shiday*), to what degree the nation’s people are proficient in English brings difference (*chai*) among the status of countries and of individuals” (M. S. Jin, 2008, January 31). Embedded in this statement is the perception that English is closely tied to the survival of a nation within the context of globalization. The word *chai* emphasizes how English ability is often considered as a decisive factor separating successful countries from those that are not. Furthermore, President Lee goes on to claim that “among non-English countries, countries that speak English well are more prosperous than those that do not speak good English” (C. K. Kim, 2008, February 1). By setting up this dichotomy of “English-fluent” and “English-poor” nations, he strongly contends that whether Korea remains competitive in the global stage depends on Korean people’s English language ability. The economic interest of the government in English is made even more evident in the presidential transition committee’s report that “when all people become able to speak freely in English, the GDP of the nation will *automatically* rise by one percent” (Y. C. Yoo, 2008, February 2). The word “automatically” discursively enhances the economic value of English, constructing it as a commodity that will boost the nation’s economy quite easily once it is fully attained. In the face of the global free market, emphasizing and reforming English education in Korea is justified as an attempt to bolster the nation’s competitive edge.

As such, the government’s utilitarian decision to use English is evidence that not all non-English nations are victims of globalization but are in fact, able to make agentive choices in accomplishment of their own projects. In Korea’s case, this project is an economic commitment to invest in the linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) of English. English, in this sense, is not seen as a mere tool for communication, but a commodity valuable because of the economic role it performs in the global market. However, several scholars from the intellectual community challenge this commonly-held belief claiming that “current global situations are different from the early 1990s” (N. J. Park, 2008). Some Korean scholars argue that with non-English countries such as China being on the economic rise, the influence of English is on the downturn as more importance is placed on learning the local languages (H. K. Kim, 2008). Such scholars, therefore, criticize the new government for its relentless promotion of English education despite the current reality, and point to this policy as being a highly ideological act (J. K. Jin, January 28, 2008; S. K. Lee, 2008). Phillipson (2008) also criticizes this action as an “uncritical adherence to the dominant world disorder” (p. 38), which contributes to the

² I adhere here to the Yale system of romanization with the exception of a few terminologies and proper names that have pre-existing romanized spellings already in frequent use: *kirogi*, *Chosun*, and *Hankyoreh*.

reproduction of imperialist power relations. Without knowing where this project will head, both political discourse and economic structure serve to perpetuate the untenable dominance of English.

5.2. *Conversational English is a top priority*

To head closer towards heightened national competitiveness, President Lee adopted a focus on promoting conversational, practical English (*silyong-yenge*) skills. Lee's proposed goal was to create an English curriculum that ensures all Koreans "be fairly fluent in conversational English (*saynghwal-yenge*), once they graduate from high school" (R. H. Park & N. M. Kim, 2008, January 26). The proponents lament the fact that most Koreans are unable to conduct a normal conversation with a foreigner and insist for a reformation of public education towards a more practical orientation. The following extract taken from a discussion forum *Sunday Debate* (Y.C. Yoo, 2008, February 2), which was broadcasted on a public television channel *KBS*, illustrates the common value placed on spoken, conversational English. The debate was originally in Korean, and the English translations are mine:

Sunday Debate, KBS, 2008, February 2

Host: How would you summarize the objective of [this policy]?

Professor: The objective is what has been the long-desired project of the country and of the people. When we go out to the global stage, we need to use English, which is a very important element of national competitiveness. However, don't we often struggle because we cannot say a single word, even though we've received 12 years of [English] education? Therefore, we've decided there's a problem with school education, and by improving public education, we hope that now people will at least be able to acquire conversational English skills (*saynghwal-yenge*) when they graduate from high school [...]

Host: So you mean you will promote English instruction with a competitive edge (*kyengcaynglyek-issnun*). In other words, you mean you will promote living (*salaissnun*) English teaching through public education [...]

In this discussion, the host questions professor S. Y. Chun of Chungnam University's education department and a member of the presidential transition committee involved in the policy's planning process. Here, English is again referred to as an indispensable tool for the country's well being. However, the kind of English that is needed is specified as both interlocutors engage in ideological work throughout the talk. Professor Chun first states that acquiring conversational English skills is a "long-desired project of the country and of the people," and this idea is corroborated by the discussion leader as "competitive" and "living" English education. Meanwhile, English teaching that fails to enhance communicative competence is considered as a "problem in school education" and as "dead" English instruction. He emphasizes that the "struggle" of having difficulties in speak English will be resolved through the reformation of the English curriculum.

Such emphasis on the importance of communicative competence in language curriculum planning is a general trend worldwide. Whether it is filtered into actual practice is left uncertain, but at least it is increasingly sought for at the policy level. Despite the popularity of the practice, however, this approach has not gone unchallenged by opponents of the policy. Scholars question whether setting communicative ability as the focus of English education is a standard that is socially agreed upon. J. K. Jin (2008, February 17), a faculty of Joong Ang University's German literature department, puts forward his skepticism in regards to the link between "learning how to say hello and increased national competitiveness." His point is that English is most needed to have access to advanced, intellectual information. In this aspect, the more relevant skills in order to do so concern high proficiency in reading and writing abilities. He argues that conversational English does not equip Koreans to become "global intellectuals," and that advanced English skills of debate language and conveying logic are of higher significance. The policy, however, lacks a consensus on what is meant by "conversational ability." English education professor C. H. Lee (2008) thus contends that "we are now in the era that places equal importance to all four language skills." In addition, the documentary *An English empire:*

South Korea (Ahn & Kang, 2008, March 16) broadcasted through public channel KBS, emphasizes translation skills as significant means of having a wider access to the international academia. This strategy is cited as Japan's secret to winning nine Nobel Prizes, all from scholars who have never studied abroad.

As illustrated, although other language skills such as textual and interpretive competence are equally worthy of training programs, the very fact that the current government has selected to promote practical, conversational English alone may be a mirror image of the "new work order" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), placing new demands on workers to be skilled in spoken language. While it has been until now in the form of TOEIC scores, the emphasis is shifting towards the assessment of actual conversational fluency. However, English literature scholar M. H. Kim (2008) displays concern that to only teach spoken English in public schools is too narrow of a focus, consequently producing an "unlettered (*wumin*)" population. This condition, according to Kim, in turn can be exploited by those who have greater economic resources as they have more access through private language schools to develop a select English language proficiency among the elite. In this case, English medium education will only continue to act as an effective class filter that ensures to reproduce class relationships, benefiting the elites to maintain their power (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). With the policy giving the discourse of conversational English privilege over others, hegemonic practices come to be built into the institutions of the society and reinforce the ideology to become viewed as a "natural" condition (Fairclough, 2001).

5.3. *English and English only*

According to the newly-proposed educational plan, the most dramatic change to be brought in Korea's English education was that all English classes will be conducted in English. Chairwoman Lee Kyung-sook of the presidential transition team explains that "to solve the burden of English starting from birth, [the government] intends to benchmark from countries that have English as an official language" (Y. Y. Lee, 2008, January 22). The possibility of teaching other subjects such as math and science in English was also mentioned, yet relegated to the distant future. In the words of Professor H.S. Han in public channel KBS's *Sunday Debate*, such plan reflects the presidential transition committee's belief that the problem of Korea's English education has to do with English classes being taught in Korean (Y. C. Yoo, 2008, February 3). Evidently, the policy is rooted in the underlying assumption that English language skills are best taught monolingually in English, and that communicative competence is the primary goal. If taught in Korean, standards of English will drop. Also assumed is that English immersion classes practiced in ESL countries will be equally effective and possible in an EFL context like Korea. Professor H. Y. Lee in *National Assembly Television* (2008, March 13) channel's *Good World, Open Debate*, calls English immersion the inevitable trend and encourages Korea to follow the models set by other Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore.

Although this ambitious plan of promoting English-medium classes is commonly accepted to be a pedagogically sound practice, it is not without its opponents. The first criticism concerns the necessity of adopting English immersion in Korea. In an interview during *MBC news*, B. M. Lee—a professor in Seoul National University's English education department—claims that English immersion is a choice to be made only when people within the nation cannot communicate without English being their common language (*News and Kyengcey*, 2008, January 29). This argument is in line with a Korean TV documentary *Sisa Magazine 2580* (S. I. Lee, 2008, February 17) broadcasted on the *MBC* public channel, which depicts English immersion countries being an entirely different context from Korea—describing them as usually former colonies of Britain, or having a population of diverse ethnicities. Considering the fact that Korea is mostly homogenous in ethnicity, and English is rarely used in everyday life, comparing Korea to ESL countries like Singapore is like "comparing a child with an adult" (B. M. Lee, 2008, January 29). Not only is Korea not ready for such a drastic change, but as an EFL setting, English immersion in public education is simply impossible (Yoon, 2008).

Even if English immersion is abandoned for the preceding reasons, teaching only English classes in English is still considered an untenable practice. Worries are that there are insufficient Korean teachers who are competent to conduct classes solely in English. Therefore, the controversial question

of who is more qualified to teach English is evoking much debate: a fluent English speaker without teacher education, or a less fluent but trained teacher. The methodology of English-only classes is also doubted by many scholars in that its effectiveness has not been proven by research. In fact, English-only classes have been challenged by several studies, with a growing interest being placed on the facilitative role of the first language (L1) in teacher-talk (Levine, 2003).

English immersion and English-only methods have usually come to be justified on pedagogical terms not only in Korea but also all over the world. However, the clashing opinions over these approaches reveal that the new educational plan has promoted this unexamined discourse without having it grounded in an awareness of Korea's reality, teachers' abilities, and language teaching theory. Auerbach (1993) criticizes these "innovative" approaches as having "antecedents in overtly ideological tendencies" (p. 13) rooted in the discourse from the Americanization period. They, therefore, are "more than a purely pedagogical matter but has ideological origins and consequences for relations of power" (p. 29). The emphasis of "only-English" produces ideological effects of marginalizing local teachers while constructing the image of "native-speakerism" (Holliday, 2006, p. 385)—making native speakers better qualified as English teachers. In other words, whether the use of only English in classes is taken for granted as natural and commonsense may be less a pedagogical concern but an ideological one, serving to maintain the unequal relations of power in the broader society.

5.4. *English brings equality*

To publicize the most primary motive behind the government's plan of strengthening public English education, President-elect Lee announced the slogan: "the vicious circle (*daemulim*) of poverty to be cut by [English] education" (Choi, 2008, January 31). President Lee asserted that the government seeks to "invest" in the English education of poor children as a way of "not *feeding* them the fish, but teaching them how to *catch* the fish." In other words, President Lee claimed that better access to English through public schooling is a way of guaranteeing equality of social and economic opportunities.

On the other hand, the general opinion among professionals is entirely the opposite. Many fear that the government's heavy emphasis on English education will actually exacerbate the "English divide," which is a phrase increasingly being used in Korea to describe the strong relationship between economic wealth and English proficiency. To illustrate this phenomenon, the TV documentary *Sisa-Magazine 2580* (2008, February 17) captures interviews from students and mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds:

- Reporter: As so, even if English would be taught in English, students that are familiar with classes conducted by native-speaking teachers are not really afraid.
- (Interview)
- StudentA: If all classes are in English like that, I think it will actually be even more convenient and easier to understand for me.
- Reporter: Why do you think it will be more convenient?
- StudentA: Since I've come here after living in the states, I've had all subjects such as math and science in English, and I've been trained to understand things in such a way.
[...]
- Reporter: Children who have not much access to English are faced with terror as they hear that English will be taught in English 2 years from now.
- (Interview)
- Reporter: They say that in 2 years, English will be taught in English. How do you feel when you think about that?
- StudentB: It's hard.
- Reporter: Hard?
- StudentB: Yes, of course. It's really hard to speak in English.

- StudentC: It makes me crazy. It makes me crazy. English is too difficult.
 Reporter: Too difficult? What's the most difficult? English?
 StudentC: Just speaking... I'm worried that I'll fall behind hhhh
 Reporter: Fall behind? Why?
 StudentC: Yes?
 Reporter: Why?
 StudentC: Because I started late...
 Reporter: Compared to children in Kangnam [an affluent district in southeast Seoul] or new cities where education fever is high, these children are not ready enough to learn English in English.
 [...] [...]
 StudentD: I think it might be difficult if English is taught only in English. I think I will feel frustrated because I cannot understand or talk, and I think I might give up learning English.
 Reporter: To children who are hardly given any opportunities to go to private institutes, English only classes or immersion classes are only heard as a story of a far way land.

The extract includes interviews with three different students in three different institutes. The first interview is situated in an elite private institute located in *Kangnam*, which is one of the wealthiest areas in Korea's capital city. The next is in more of an average conversational English institute, which is a 30-40 minute ride from the first institute, and the last interview is in a community center. It is not present in the data, but the way the documentary highlights the contrasting nature of each of the classes is very clear set. While in the elite private institute, third and fourth graders are actively engaged with a "native-speaking teacher" in a lecture about Thomas Edison and the Korean War; the children in the second institute, who are fourth or fifth graders, display struggles in a lesson about "self-introduction." The children in the community center are the oldest, in sixth grade, but the documentary films them learning how to count in class. Also setting apart the three students are their responses towards the English immersion policy. Having been "trained" from studies abroad, the child from the elite school (StudentA) is "not afraid" but welcomingly marks it as being a "convenience." Meanwhile, for the other two children, English is characterized as a 'difficult' subject. The mentioning of English-only classes bring them feelings of "terror," "craziness," "worry," "falling behind," "frustration," and "giving up."

From their distinctive reactions to the English immersion policy, it is clear that children from disadvantaged groups are not competing with equal starting points with those from the elite class. Although the lower class students do end up learning in school, they are still in a "race the rules of which are laid down by the privileged classes, who are already way ahead of them in the race" (Lin, 2001, p. 285); hence, due to the initial difference in the right kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991), reproduction of social stratification becomes inevitable. The elite children are bestowed with the familial socialization of "education fever," from which they inherit the cultural capital for school success. On the other hand, the other children are locked in a class position where they are not "given" the opportunities or access to such capital. In this light, educational scholar Y. I. Kim (2008) argues that is hard to deny the fact that the new educational policy is planned to deliberately ensure that power remains in the hands of the few. English, with this added importance in Korea's educational system, will become one of the most notorious obstacles to some in reach of education, employment, and other opportunities (Pennycook, 1995, 2006).

6. Print media as an ideological battleground

This section looks at news articles and editorials of two different newspapers—*The Chosun Ilbo* and *The Hankyoreh*—that deal with the new government's policy proposal for English-medium classes in public schools. The *Chosun Ilbo* has the widest readership, but it is considered to serve the interests of the ruling class, striving to stabilize the social order by affirming the existing structure of Korean society and denouncing subversive attempts of radical groups to rebel against social inequality.

Allegedly, it was also a huge supporter of the current president Lee Myung Bak during last year's elections. By contrast, *The Hankyoreh* often takes the role of offsetting the influence of *Chosun Ilbo* in order to maximize the interests of the labor and underprivileged groups.

The focus of this section is to explore how the policy is presented in print media through which preexisting language ideologies are reproduced and manipulated: What ideologies of the policy discourse are aligned with in the print media? How do the texts recursively contribute to the formation and legitimating of the ideologies? Furthermore, I also examine how particular ideologies in the text are selectively adopted and recontextualized alongside the distinct political positions of each newspaper and consciousness of its target audience. To demonstrate the nature of the ideological debate between the two newspapers, I will conduct a critical analysis on the headlines and extracts of their articles. The presented data are all translations of the original Korean texts, and I added emphasis in italics to draw attention to particular words.

6.1. Discourses of *Chosun Ilbo*: Pro-English immersion

The initial significant question to be addressed is: whose voices are included and whose are excluded? The answer to this question can be easily discovered just by an easy glance on the headlines of *Chosun Ilbo*:

- (a) President-elect Lee “Countries good in English are prosperous” (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2008, February 1)
- (b) “Keep saying that practical English education is impossible in regular classes, and it will be impossible forever” (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2008, January 29)
- (c) “Will get rid of English divide. How is this reproducing social inequality?” (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2008, January 31)

The three headlines are direct quotes from the president (a) and from Lee Dong Kwan, the spokesman of the presidential transition committee (b, c). The sources of (b) and (c) are not readily indicated in the headlines as in (a), but are identifiable by the sub-headline right underneath. To include quotes in a headline is often typical in the genre of press report. By doing so, not only is the author able to accomplish an implicit claim of displaying faithfulness to the original, but it also establishes a stance indicating which voices each article represents. In this case, it can be inferred by the headlines that articles under (a) to (c) represent the voices of the president and his committee—the main agents of distributing the policy. The fact that (b) and (c) do not attribute the quote to its original source in the headline may further perform the function of reducing the distance between the author and the speaker of the quote, possibly signaling that the article's content will more likely to be unitary with the president's political discourse.

Having made explicit that each headline in *Chosun Ilbo* represents the voices of the policy makers, it is not surprising to see that the four ideologies discussed in the previous section are again being reproduced. In (a), English is promoted as a desirable economic commodity for national growth; (b) assumes that practical English education is worthy of continuous pursuit; and (c), through a rhetorical question, entextualizes the discourse of English and equality. However, in the actual text, the ideologies are not mapped on to a clear one-to-one fashion, but involve a more complex, multi-layered representation.

As the number of ‘kirogi’ families increase, so does the *distress* of the mothers who went abroad to America to take care of their children. “Why couldn't I learn English *properly*?” Mothers who cannot escape from being ‘mute’ even after learning 6-8 years of English through public education are strongly feeling the *blind spot* of our country's language education. This is not a *problem* limited to them... The amount of *individual loss* and *national waste* caused by poor English skills is too much to be measured. (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2008, February 10)

What is evident is that despite the fact (we) learn English for over 10 years, (we) cannot even say a single word in front of a foreigner. That kind of English education is a *waste of money*, and a *waste of time* (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2008, January 27).

In the two extracts above, the articles draw on the ideology of “self-deprecation” (J. S. Park, 2004), which generalizes all Koreans as incompetent speakers of English. The varying levels of English speakers in Korea are eliminated from the picture, and the long period of education Koreans undertake to learn English is deemed as ineffective. Furthermore, such low English speaking proficiency is directly associated with economic loss both at the individual and national level. Made evident here is the common perception of English as being an investment, and the “proper” gains of it being demonstrated in communicative competence. Claims as such, however, are virtually never presented with any evidence. How the limited English abilities of kirogi mothers might lead to “individual and national loss” is left to doubt. Also, the reality that not all Koreans will ever have to talk with a foreigner seems to be out of the question. Yet it is assumed that all Koreans are in need of English skills and the generalized failure of Koreans’ mastery of spoken English is foregrounded as the reason for drastic reform in English education. English-only classes and focus on spoken English is thus presented as the radical solution of salvaging all Koreans from any distress or loss.

Another theme commonly drawn on to justify the new policy is the imminent reality of globalization.

Now the world is heading towards an ‘open place’... We cannot live with our doors shut. No, we have to be more forward and walk towards the world. If tied to Northern Asia, (we) will only be victims of China and Japan’s supremacy. At this moment, the *weapon* we can give to our children is a challenging spirit and *language proficiency*. In this world, only those with excellent language skills will survive. We cannot leave our children to be ‘half-muted’ in English in this kind of world. (Chosun Ilbo, 2008, February 10)

The modality³ is significant in this extract. While the ‘global’ space-time is constructed as actual, real, and still continuing, the ‘Korean’ space-time is what is anticipated and what ‘must’ be (Fairclough, 2003). With globalization as the current reality, what is normative and obligatory is to be ‘open,’ and such global integration is most possible through means of English. The argument is dialogical in the sense that it responds to an imagined antagonist (along the lines of: ‘No, we have to be more forward and walk towards the world’), denying its main argument in the context of threats coming from other North Asian countries. Also, to arrive at a coherent reading of this text, ‘language proficiency’ needs to be taken as equivalent to ‘proficiency in spoken English.’ In the transnational ‘battle’ for international competitiveness, the good ‘weapon’ that leads to survival is clearly presented as English not Korean. Communicative competence in English is instrumental in giving Korea with ‘voice,’ a more competitive edge than China and Japan in the indispensable reality of globalization. No reference is made to other skills such as science and innovation in digital technology, but the message that English is the global capital is naturalized as common sense.

Aligned with globalization, the value of English is also presented along the line of knowledge-based society.

Out of the top 100 universities of the world, 75 are in English-speaking countries, and living in a reality where 70% of internet information is in English, English is the *fount of knowledge and economic power*... (Chosun Ilbo, 2008, January 30)

It is approximated that the population with English as either a native language or official language amounts to about 800 million. 56 countries in the world are using English. Moreover, around 80% of the world’s information, technology, industry, and cultural goods are in English... Therefore, without knowing English, one cannot gain access to new knowledge. It has become a world where not knowing English inevitably makes one “*knowledge-deprived*.” (Chosun Ilbo, 2008, February 13)

³ Following Fairclough (2001), modality here has “to do with speaker or writer authority” (p. 105). Modality is of ideological interest because of its indexical properties of expressing commitment to the truth of the proposition, authority claims, and power relations.

The main assumption underlying these two extracts is that success depends ultimately on knowledge. Being “knowledge-deprived” is something to be avoided while the means leading to maximum access of knowledge is what should be attained. Through sequences of categorical, non-modalized assertions, knowledge-based society presented as a given reality, and English is portrayed as the medium of knowledge distribution. Presented through the discourse of “quantification,” each of the numbers gives a factual impression that English is indeed the door leading to advanced information. In this context, English is given capital and tied with “economic power.” The sources of these numbers, however, are unclear, and there is wonder whether everyone, despite learning English, will be able to have access to English-speaking universities or cutting-edge information is quite questionable. Although all of these assumptions are contentious, what is produced is an apparently consensual text.

As demonstrated in the articles so far, the ideologies of valuing English, specifically spoken English, as a commodity in the global market and English-only classes as a remedy of English education is reflected on and confirmed throughout the texts, but in a manner so naturalized that they are easily taken for granted. In sum, the articles in *Chosun Ilbo* are often reassertions and confirmations of the existing strategy and discourse present in the policy proposal, but recontextualized as they are coupled with additional discourses such as self-deprecation, globalization, and knowledge-based society. Meanwhile, it is also evident the texts largely come from alignment with the voices of the policy planners while those from the actual stakeholders of English education are relatively missing. Any discussion on English and its assumed connection to social equality is absent from the picture as well. The president’s proposed goal to solve social inequality through English education is relatively less commented on in any of the *Chosun Ilbo*’s articles, which is in drastic contrast from what is presented in another newspaper *Hankyoreh*, to be discussed below.

6.2. Discourses of *Hankyoreh*: Anti-English immersion

In comparison with *Chosun Ilbo*, the headlines of *Hankyoreh* are more dialogic, conveying different voices that were unheard in *Chosun Ilbo*.

- (d) *Middle school students*, “feel burdened by classes to be conducted in English in 2010” (*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 24)
- (e) 60% of *teachers* against “English-only classes” (*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 27)
- (f) *English linguistics professors* will lift their “stick” “New government ignores reality of English education” (*Hankyoreh*, 2008, March 14)
- (g) *Native-speaking teachers*, how do they view “reinforcement of English public education” (*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 30)
- (h) *Kirogi fathers* “Presidential transition committee, too ignorant of reality” (*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 28)

Bringing in a variety of perspectives, it is well illustrated that there are competing voices on the proposed policy. Explicit attributions are made to the sources of each quote, which accentuates the orientation to difference made across each of the articles. Not only are the main stakeholders included, but interestingly, native-speaking teachers and even *kirogi* fathers are also given voice in this newspaper.

As it is already made evident from the headlines above, the general tone of the articles are towards a more negative attitude. Strong evaluative words such as “burden,” “against,” “stick,” and “ignorant” characterize the anti-English-medium position *Hankyoreh* is taking towards the new policy proposal. A repeating theme in *Hankyoreh* is first centered on addressing the reality of the education field.

“To teach English even in Korean is difficult. Classes in English are too hard for students.”
(*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 28)

Increasing number of teachers, developing new textbooks, etc. Tasks are piling up.
(*Hankyoreh*, 2008, January 26)

Teacher facilities not ready for “English classes in English.” Pour in money and everything will magically be ready in just 2 years? (Hankyoreh, 2008, January 26)

Taking the position of students and teachers, a major concern in these articles is that the policy itself is not realistic. The policy is criticized for not taking into consideration the current abilities of both the teachers and students. The time line of a mere two years is also viewed as inadequate to be ready for this educational transformation. Blinded by the impending calls to globalization and neoliberal demands, the government is thought of as taking uncritical measures to English education reform without necessarily considering the current domestic situations. In this aspect, it can be said that while *Chosun Ilbo* focused more on the macro forces acting upon Korea, *Hankyoreh* is zooming in into the voices coming from local perspectives.

In addition, a critical stance largely missing from *Chosun Ilbo*—English and equality—is a central issue in *Hankyoreh*.

The gap between upper and lower class students is tremendous. But the target of the new government’s English policy is “ambiguous...” Nowhere in the presidential transition committee’s policy is there a solution to satisfy both the upper class that seek for studies abroad and the lower class who have difficulties even writing the alphabet ... Soyun Lee, a teacher working at Seoul Majang middle school, said ... “for English education to be effective, policies that carefully consider the existing gap among students’ English proficiency are needed.” (Hankyoreh, 2008, February 24)

New government’s English policy, can it reduce private education?... English-only classes will end up exacerbating the inequality of English education across different socioeconomic classes. As a result, public education will collapse. A policy intended to revive English public education will only increase private education. The policy might end up as a boomerang that will destroy public education. (Hankyoreh, 2008, February 24)

Counter to the original government’s proposal that the new English education policy will bring an end to social inequality, the articles in *Hankyoreh* worry that the total opposite will occur. The more emphasis is given towards English in public schools, the more people will seek for private cram schools, and as a result, the gap between social classes will be further widened. Unlike *Chosun Ilbo*, concern about the worsening of English stratification constitutes the core of *Hankyoreh*’s articles. Such focus on the issue English and social divide might be interpreted as the newspaper’s orientation towards working for the interests of the working class.

Despite the contrasting tone *Hankyoreh* is taking from *Chosun Ilbo*, however, the two do not seem to differ much in their repertoire of ideological assumptions. Both newspapers share a common ground in that they do not resist the ideology of English being a tool for individual success. The fact that English proficiency is a class marker in Korean society is assumed as common sense. Also, there is an agreement that reviving English education and making it more effective is needed in Korea’s society. The linguistic, social, and cultural value placed on English is hardly being questioned at all. The only difference is the way it is contextualized within the text. In *Chosun Ilbo*, the symbolic capital of English is foregrounded as a rationale for promoting English-medium classes in Korea while in *Hankyoreh*, it has been re-framed to highlight the current inequality existing in Korean society. The underlying discursive power of both argumentations, as a result, serves to reinforce the supremacy of elites with English proficiency against the masses without English.

In conclusion, a critical analysis of newspapers and their stances in the English-medium class debate reveals that English policy in Korea is entangled with various ideological positions. Also illustrated is how each newspaper perpetuates certain attitudes towards the new policy in order to maximize the benefits of their target readers. Depending on the political agenda of the newspaper, there are differences in whose voices are selected as representative, which in turn alters the way the policy and the societal function of English are being presented to the public. It is through this process that the ideologies of English are reproduced. The rhetorical and attitudinal stances of each position give the impression as if English is performing contradictory roles and functions. However, what is

noteworthy is that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the ideologies and pro- or anti-English-medium positions. Both sides of the debate rather seem to share the same preexisting ideologies of English: English as a highly desired symbolic resource in Korean society, and English language learning as a valued experience. Embedded in the larger discourse of the inevitability of globalization, these ideologies are recontextualized to serve the specific interests of each side of the debate, and the discursive output of them adds on to the ideological process of reproducing the hegemonic status of English in Korea. The desirable way to teach English in public schools and the specific English skill to be taught may be contested among different sites and social groups, but the desire for English, the importance of learning English in Korea is solidified as an indisputable fact.

7. Conclusion

While Korea is facing global tensions of linguistic hegemony, there is also the domestic struggle for attaining linguistic capital. Therefore, the nature of the competing discourses surrounding the English immersion debate is complex, multi-layered, and somewhat overlapping. In this study, I have shown how language ideologies of English are constructed and reproduced in South Korea as discourses embedding dominant ideologies are reconfigured and appropriated context-specifically across different speech genres to maximize the interests of the social group each speaker belongs to. I have argued that despite the multiple societal meanings English appears to possess in Korea's society, the discourses share similar ideological roots that reemphasize the symbolic capital of English.

The ambitious plan to promote English immersion in Korea is left as a failure, but it is quite possible that its discursive, ideological effects will continue to echo throughout Korean society for a considerable period. A limitation of the present study is that the historical traces of English education in Korea are missing, an understanding which is crucial in order to properly discuss and extract ideologies from texts. I will set it aside for now as a topic to be explored in the near future. Despite such shortcomings, I still consider this study an attempt to open further discussions on deconstructing the myths deeply rooted within the consciousness of Korean society. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to constructing a critical awareness of the spread of English and its effect on Korean society. I also hope that it will establish a baseline for forthcoming language planning processes and policies in South Korea, leading to the creation of an appropriate model for the Korean context.

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