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English just is not enough!: Neoliberalism, class, and children's study abroad among Korean families

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ABSTRACT

Early study abroad (ESA) has been popular among middle/upper class Korean families who use overseas experiences for the accumulation of capital and class mobility. Following up with two graduate student families in Song (2012), this study examines these two families' post-ESA experiences from the mothers' perspectives. It attends particularly to the role of English in their children's educational trajectories and the family's class positioning against economically-privileged Gangnam families.

The results demonstrate the two mothers' complex attitudes toward linguistic and class ideologies that deepen the 'English divide' in Korean society. While they criticized class-based inequalities surrounding English education, they themselves were content with the linguistic capital accumulated overseas for their children's competitiveness in the Korean educational context and beyond. They also realized that the increasing number of good English speakers with superior economic means deprived them of the privilege associated with the competence in English. That is, the value of competence is synergistic with other social advantages that are highly dependent on one's economic background. The results illuminate how class mediates not only the distribution, but also the return of the capital through a powerful neoliberal social order that drives Koreans to pursue the valuable capital at any cost.

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1. Introduction

Children's early study abroad¹ (ESA) to English speaking countries has been very popular among middle/upper class Asian families who use the overseas experiences for the accumulation of capital and class mobility (Chew, 2010; Ong, 1999; Park & Lo, 2012; Song, 2010). While ESA has provided young children with opportunities to learn English efficiently at an early age and to experience diverse cultural and educational programs overseas, it has also promoted new social phenomena by modifying the meaning of family life (Cho & Shin, 2008), deepening class inequality through families' 'excessive' investment in their children's English acquisition (Lee, 2015; Park & Lo, 2012), and extending domestic competitions over class, identity, and capital into transnational space (Kang & Abelman, 2011; Song, 2012a).

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¹ It takes various forms, periods, and locations: children-only ESA through home stays or boarding schools and family-accompanied ESA through company sponsorship or for parents' study; long-term ESA in western English-speaking countries and short-term stays in Asian countries. In many cases, the goals of study abroad, parents' work or study and children's study abroad, overlap. Thus, the term, ESA, in this study is used broadly to refer to children's study abroad before college.

While numerous studies have discussed transnational and educational experiences of Korean families and children during their study abroad at various locations, there has been little discussion of their experiences after returning to Korea. Song (2012a) describes how two families of Korean graduate students compete with economically privileged ESA families by investing in different linguistic and social capital during their study abroad. As a continuation of that study, this article seeks for answers for the following two questions, from the two mothers' perspectives: (1) What is the role of study abroad and English competence in the two children's educational trajectories?; (2) What is the role of their class in maintaining and accruing cultural capital of English after study abroad?

The article begins by addressing how English, class, and neoliberalism intersect in Korea, focusing on educational policies and practices followed by a discussion of how ESA, driven by a neoliberal ideology, reflects and deepens class struggle. The data analysis section begins with the discussion of the educational trajectories of the two children, Sunjae and Joonho, after their study abroad. Then, it examines the mothers' views of their deteriorated class positioning in relation to the affluent Korean families and its effect on the cultural capital of children's English competence. By discussing tensions over ideologies of English and children's English acquisition, particularly how competence in English is socially distributed and assessed as an index of socioeconomic background, this study illuminates how children's English acquisition is a site for reflecting and reproducing class struggle and neoliberal social order.

2. Literature review

2.1. Neoliberalism and South Koreans' ESA

English fever or English frenzy in Korean society manifests in various educational policies and proposals advanced by several administrations over the past two decades. Among them are the introduction of English to elementary schools (3rd grade) in the early 1990s, English Villages where only English is permitted, the teaching English in English (TEE) method implemented in secondary education, frequent changes to English curricula to emphasize the acquisition of communicative competence, a proposal for English immersion for all subject areas in public schools, and the establishment of prestigious special high schools that emphasize English competence. Similarly, in higher education, universities have been pressured to offer English medium courses and to require English test scores for graduation in an effort to internationalize campuses. These various policies emphasize English in education and job markets. As a result, English has become one of the 'soft skills' (Urciuoli, 2008) that are crucial for academic and career success in Korea.

This English frenzy is closely related to the neoliberal educational market, which valorizes English, especially the standard English of native speakers (Park, 2010, 2011; Pillier & Cho, 2013). Neoliberalism as an economic theory undergirded by individualism and laissez-faire policies that encourage free market competition has been the driving force for the global spread of new capitalism for the past several decades. In the field of language education, the ideology that promotes English as a world language underlines neoliberalism (Phillipson, 2008), since the globalization of the free market theory naturalizes English for both individual and national competitiveness in the global market (Pillier & Cho, 2013). As a result, English has become 'the embodiment of neoliberal ideology' across the world (Holborow, 2012, p. 26).

To restructure its economy after the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s, the Korean government proposed various projects under the slogan 'segehwa' (globalization). Those policies aimed to produce 'global citizens' who were competitive in the global market and to boost the nation's economy. As those policies facilitated individuals' linguistic capital accumulation through English acquisition, English has become a gatekeeper for social, economic, and educational success in Korea. That is, neoliberalism, which in theory originally intends to deregulate policies, in fact serves to regulate or monopolize individuals' choices, which has resulted in a rigid social order and a high level of inequality (Pillier & Cho, 2013). In this regard, Pillier and Cho (2013) contend that neoliberalism itself ranks among Korea's language policies as it imposes English as 'a natural and neutral medium of academic excellence' in many colleges (p. 42).

As such, globalization, neoliberalism, and English remain closely associated. The emphasis on English in education and job markets has led Koreans either to invest heavily in English or worry about obtaining sufficient capital, often feeling inferior to those with a near-native command of English (Park, 2015). However, as Koreans do not use English daily, self-discipline or a mastery of contents on tests in school is inadequate for achieving linguistic competence. Korean parents use various means to help their children acquire the language, e.g., English kindergarten, private lessons, afterschool English institutes, and study abroad to English-speaking countries. In this context, children's proficiency in English becomes a marker of families' class background as middle and upper class children have access to the most efficient and quality resources and familial support for English acquisition. Additionally, several governmental policies, including the establishment of English Village, prestigious high schools that emphasize English, and English immersion in public schools, serve the interests of Korean middle/upper class families, whose access to English further enhances their economic and cultural privilege (Park, 2010, 2011, 2013). In this regard, competence in English indexes and mediates a class position and becomes a powerful resource for distinction (Block, 2014).

Furthermore, Park (2010) argues that English in Korea comes to index 'an ideal way of being', going beyond a marker of social status and power (p. 25). He explains that English plays a significant role in Koreans' everyday life since the nation's initial neoliberal transformation in the mid-1990s. The introduction of English to elementary schools and the removal of the school equalization policy, which unified school curricula and student selection procedures, brought about a liberalization and increased competition among schools. In this way, the quality of a school's English education determined its prestige and

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