'English fever' in South Korea: its history and symptoms

JIN-KYU PARK

'Education fever' drives the demand for English in South Korea today

Introduction

One professor of politics has recently deplored the current pursuit of 'English education' (*yeongeokyoyuk*) in South Korea as a 'collective neurosis of English fever' (Y-M. Kim, 2002). What has brought this current English boom to South Korea? It can be traced back to the traditional 'education fever' (*kyoyukyeol*) or 'preoccupation with education' (Seth, 2002). The English boom resulting from the Korean education fever has led to a strong antipathy toward Koreans – even in English-speaking countries.

This article explains how the current English boom in South Korea has been founded on the long tradition of education fever in the country, and why more and more Korean children are sent abroad to learn the English language. In addition, I also attempt to show the connection between this English boom and an associated antipathy toward the Korean language and Korean speakers in English-speaking countries.

'Education fever' and English

These days, a huge amount of money is being spent on 'English education' (*yeongeokyoyuk*) in South Korea every year. Children as young as five years as well as school-age students are studying English until late at night in tens of thousands of cramming schools (*hagwon*). A great number of children are being sent to foreign countries for the purpose of 'English education' and the number is increasing year by year.

This current English boom in South Korea is considered to have its roots in what Koreans themselves call 'education fever' (*kyoyukyeol*) or 'national obsession with the attainment of education' (Seth, 2002:9). 'This preoccupation with the pursuit of formal schooling,' according to Seth, 'was the product of the diffusion of traditional Confucian attitudes toward learning and status, new egalitarian ideas introduced from the West, and the complex, often contradictory ways in which new and old ideas and formulations interacted' (p. 6). As 'a way of achieving status and power' as well as 'a means of self-cultivation,' most Koreans agree, education in South Korea has been valued for centuries (Seth, 2002:9). In addition, modern egalitarian ideas from the West, along with the collapse of traditional social classes after the Japanese occupation in the early twentieth century has driven the country to suffer from new and more intense 'education fever.'

These days, owing to the collapse of the traditional class system, there is a belief that virtually any Korean can advance himself through his own efforts. Education is seen as the most powerful means to achieve upward social mobility and economic prosperity, and many Korean parents believe that they can help



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their children succeed by emphasizing, and even imposing, education for their children.

This current excessive pursuit of 'intense, all-or-nothing competition' in South Korea (Vitello, 2006) is similar to the efforts of 'the transgenerational reproduction' by the North American white middle class (Griffith & Smith, 2005:28). The Korean mothers in the education fever who have reached the middle class through education are also 'married, college-educated, suburban women with school-age children,' who are quite similar to American 'soccer moms' (Weisberg, 1996). A typical Korean 'soccer mom' can be defined – along with her American counterpart – as 'a well-heeled super-parent whose primary mission in life is to do too much for her children,' a definition Weisberg (1996) quotes from a South Carolina newspaper.

These Korean 'soccer moms' have produced a different kind of inequality by arranging extra teaching for their children outside school, and *kwaoe*, or 'private tutoring and out-of-school lessons,' is now widespread throughout South Korea. According to Seth (2002), *kwaoe* is the greatest single factor in the escalating price of schooling, placing a big financial burden on Korean families, and undermining the policy of egalitarian access to education (Seth, 2002:185).

'In ensuring the transmission of middle-class status to their children,' the new Korean middle-class parents, quite similar to the American middle-class parents, are inclined to 'rely on educational institutions that would secure the appropriate credentials' (Griffith & Smith, 2005:22). A recent newspaper article reported on what these Korean 'soccer moms' do for their children (J-Y. Kim, 2007), including paying one million won (nearly $1,000) a month to English-immersion schools where their 5- to 6-year-old children learn English from native speakers of English. When their children become elementary school students, they travel with their children to an English-speaking country for a couple of years. Crucially, the focus of these parental practices is on their children's 'educational entry into higher levels of schooling and prestigious institutions' (Seth, 2002:5).

The cost of education

Parental practices in securing education for their children has made South Korea 'the most exam-obsessed culture in the world' (Seth, 2002:5). Although this 'education fever' has reduced the illiteracy rate of South Korea to almost zero, the 'education fever' as a form of 'the relentless competition to score well on entrance exams' has been a major force in shaping the country's educational development, producing such problems as 'great financial hardship for millions of Koreans and many anomalies in both the educational system and the general economy' (Seth, 2002:5–6).

The amount of money spent on education in 2006 reached up to 20 trillion won or approximately $20 billion, according to a Korean daily newspaper *The Hankyoreh* (C-S. Park, 2007). Korean parents 'invest' a large portion of their income on their children's education. The education includes all extracurricular lessons, such as cram schools (*hagwon*), private tutoring (*kwaoe*), English camps (*yeongeocamp*), and even language training abroad (*haewoeyonsu*). More than half of the money is being spent on 'English education' (*yeongeokyoyuk*). According to a recent report, the estimated amount spent on 'English education' in 2005 reached up to 15 trillion won (nearly $ 15 billion), including the money spent for tests of English (H-C. Chun & H-S. Choi, 2006). This is a huge increase when compared to the around 10 trillion won (nearly $10 billion) spent in 2000 (E-A. Cho, 2006).

Unfortunately, this expensive investment in English education has never been regarded by Koreans as satisfactory or, more precisely, efficient. Compared with Japan, South Korea spent almost three times more money on English education, but, in spite of this, the average TOEFL scores for South Korean examinees ranked 93rd out of 147 countries in 2004 and 2005. This means that there is a 'high-cost and low-efficiency' in the English education of Koreans (H-C. Chun & H-S. Choi, 2006). This self-evaluated low competence in English has become 'a concern for government and industry, which feared a linguistic handicap that would hurt the international competitiveness of Korean firms' (Seth, 2002:190). In turn, this concern has added fuel to the education fever in South Korea, bringing about another more negative social phenomenon, 'English fever,' a term coined by Krashen (2003), so much so that English has now become 'a class marker' (S-J. Park & N. Abelmann, 2004:646).

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The English boom in South Korea

What, then, has brought about the current boom of English-related social practices including 'early study-abroad'? Historically, there are three main sources for this current emphasis on oral language competence in English and associated 'early study-abroad': government policy changes, social and economic changes, and increasing influence of communicative teaching methods in academia.

Most important of all, the Korean government has played a critical role in creating the current English boom. In the late 1990s, experts argued for the introduction of English listening tests in the entrance examinations (e.g., J-H. Jung, 1990). This was also closely related to the English-only trend in academia, which will be discussed below. In January 1991, the Korean government decided to include English listening tests into the national college entrance examinations (*Donga Ilbo*, 1991), which moved Korean parents to start pushing their children to improve their listening skills in preparation for these new tests.

Another innovation was the 1994 revision of university entrance examinations away from grammatical items towards a more communicative approach. Parents had to change their focus of English towards communicative competence, instead of grammatical knowledge. As a result of this, a great number of exam-related books were published in order to meet these new needs. All this, however, was just the prelude to a bigger explosion in the English boom.

The relentless competition for learning English increased greatly in the summer of 1991, when the government announced the plan to teach English in all elementary school grades by 1995 (*Segye Ilbo*, 1991). The news swept the whole country into the 'English fever' which still rages today. A new industry called 'English education industry' (*yeongeokyoyuk sanup*) has been exploding year after year, even surviving the economic crisis of 1997. Hundreds of English-only private institutions, English learning materials for kids, and English conversation services are among the best-known examples of services and products in this new industry (W-P. Cho, 1996).

In fact, 'early English education' (*chogi yeongeokyoyuk*) first became an issue in the 1980s, at the time of the Asian Games of 1986 and the Seoul Olympics in 1988 (W-P. Cho, 1996). Parents then began sending their children to English-speaking countries to gain an advantage over other students. Until then, this movement had not been as big a social issue because only a privileged few with wealth and power had been able to afford such services for their children.

The rather extreme practices of Korean parents in securing early English education for their children have been reported not only in Korea, but also abroad. For example, Korean parents gained notoriety for an extreme practice known as 'linguistic surgery'. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Demick (2002) reported examples of Korean parents forcing their children to undergo a frenectomy, a surgical procedure to correct a condition popularly known as 'tongue-tiedness'. These Korean parents believed that the longer and more flexible tongue produced by the surgery could better produce English sounds such as the 'r' in 'rice,' which is often pronounced by Koreans as 'lice.'

Other driving forces in the English boom were the process of globalization in the late 1980s and the economic crisis in the late 1990s. The 1986 Asian Games and the Seoul Olympic Games made South Korea aware of globalization, and the Korean financial crisis of 1997 made Koreans realize how much English was valued in the process of globalization (Demick, 2002), all of which drove Koreans to focus more on oral proficiency in English.

Both experts and laymen in South Korea attributed the failures of English education to the traditional grammar/translation method, and experts argued for the communicative language teaching method to improve communicative competence or, more precisely, oral language fluency (N-S. Chun, 1992). As a result, this new focus on oral language proficiency in English has bought about an 'intense desire to speak native-like English' (S. Shin, 2005:66).

The increasing influence of communicative language teaching methods was another source of the current English boom in South Korea. The Korean government's policy emphasizing oral competence in English came from this increasing power of the communicative approach in language teaching in South Korean academia. Experts in the area of language education expressed their opinions in favor of English-only instruction, hushing those voices who were concerned about the influence of English on young children's Korean language development,

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as well as psychosocial development (e.g., S-Y. Chun, 1993; H-S. Yum, 1993). Universities began giving lectures in English to help students improve English competence (*Donga Ilbo*, 1990), and elementary school teachers were recommended to teach students English in only English, even though there were few teachers who could lead the class in English (R. Oh, 1996). Colleges and universities preferred to hire professors who could teach courses in English. Most surprisingly, it was reported that a university in South Korea planned to hire a professor who could teach Korean language and literature in English (J-H. Ko, C-H. Cho, D-H. Lee, & W-K. Park, 2006).

As expected, unprepared English-only instruction has caused various side effects such as students' lack of interest in the content, increased stress on teachers, communication problems and, most important of all, limited understanding of the content (J-I. Kim, 2006). However, despite such problems, more and more institutions have promoted English-only instruction policies.

At the same time, Koreans have come to think that native speakers of English are the best teachers of English. More and more native speakers of English have been hired regardless of their educational backgrounds. As reported in a newspaper article, not only primary and secondary schools but colleges and universities have also had difficulty in finding native speakers of English who could meet minimum requirements (K-J. Lee & W-J. Chang, 2006). Even the Korean government has difficulty recruiting qualified native speakers of English to schools, although, at present, the government has been trying to hire at least one native speaker of English for each primary and secondary school in South Korea. In order to achieve this goal, the government would need to hire at least 10,000 native speakers of English, but in 2006 only 1,950 native speakers of English were employed (B-K. Lee, 2006).

Local governments in South Korea have tried hard to open 'English villages,' or English-only towns. Since August, 2004, when the first English village opened near Seoul, a number of English villages have been built and more are planned to be built soon (D-Y. Kim, 2004). A huge amount of money has been poured into the villages and a great number of native speakers of English have been hired as villagers of the English-immersion towns.

Hundreds of English-only 'cram schools' (*hagwon*) have been opened in almost every city in South Korea. Cramming schools have to pay $3,000 monthly in order to employ a native speaker of English, and often have to hire unqualified native speakers of English in order to meet the expectations of Korean parents (S-Y. Yun, 2006).

All such English-only movements have brought with them the fear of the Korean language's influence. Consequently, many Korean parents try hard to put their children in an English-only environment, preferably with few or zero Koreans – places such as English villages or English training camps. However, many Korean parents are dissatisfied with the English teaching available in South Korea, and believe that the best way for their children to learn English is to send them to English-speaking countries.

Korean children studying abroad

Today, the fast increasing number of young Korean children who are sent abroad by their parents for study has become a social concern in South Korea (e.g., H-W. Kim, 2005; Y-M. Kim, 2002). Most of these children, especially the elementary school students, have been sent abroad mainly for the acquisition of English (J-K. Kim, 2006). Many educators and doctors are concerned about these young Korean children's psychosocial development (e.g., B-S. Kim, 2000), as well as their linguistic and academic development, in the foreign countries as second-language learners (e.g., J-H. Lim, 2005) and as returnees once back home in South Korea (J-Y. Lee, 2000).

This overwhelming English boom in South Korea hushes concerns about young children's delay in psychosocial, linguistic, and academic development (Y-M. Kim, 2002; J-K. Park, 2007). However, this delay in children's development has been treated as a necessary evil by Korean parents, and despite many anecdotal and academic reports of the problems related to the development of these young Korean children, the numbers going abroad for study has been increasing rapidly in recent years.

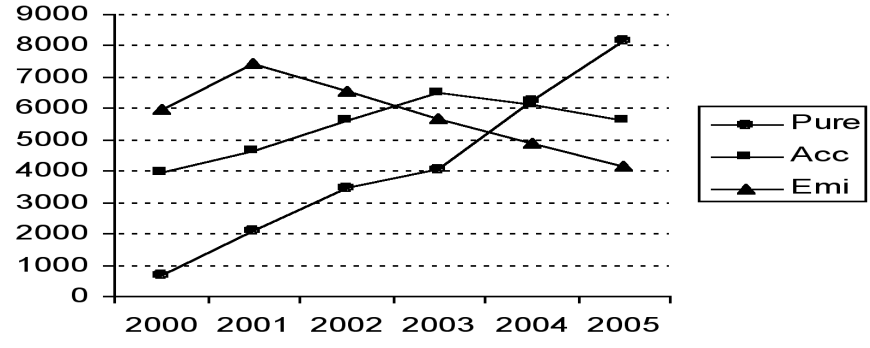
According to a report from the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2006), more than 35,000 elementary and secondary school students went abroad in the school year 2005–06. This does not include the tens of thousands of students who went abroad to participate in short-term language training

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Table 1: Number of Cases of Elementary Early Study-Abroad,

Year	Pure	Accompanied	Emigration	Total
2000	705	3,959	5,976	10,640
2001	2,107	4,660	7,453	14,220
2002	3,464	5,646	6,551	15,661
2003	4,052	6,514	5,698	16,264
2004	6,276	6,119	4,909	17,304
2005	**8,148**	5,617	4,156	17,921

*Adapted from the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2006)



* Acc: Accompanied by parents; Emi: Emigrant children

Figure 1. Change in the number of cases of elementary early study-abroad

programs during their vacations. Surprisingly, over 50% of those students who went abroad – approximately 17,000 – were elementary school students. This increasing boom for early study-abroad among elementary school students is illustrated in Table 1.

It is even more surprising when we see the rate of increase in the number of elementary 'pure early study-abroad' cases; that is, those elementary school students who were sent abroad for study, mostly alone or with a single parent. As in Table 1 and Figure 1, the numbers of elementary 'pure early study-abroad' students increased to 8,148 in the 2005 school year, a number that is 11.5 times larger than that for the 2000 school year. The early study-abroad of elementary and middle school children has been illegal in South Korea since November of 2000, so none of these elementary school students were sent abroad legally in the 2005 school year. Only three cases of legal study-abroad were reported, but these were of middle school students.

Most surprisingly, the report implies that most of these illegal cases of study-abroad are of those elementary school students who went abroad with no other family members or with a single parent. In other words, many of the children live in the foreign country with no parent or with *girogi umma*, 'a wild goose mother' whose husband is working in Korea for financial support. This current boom for early study-abroad, needless to say, has become a social concern, but the number has been increasing year after year and the age is getting younger (Y-S. Choi, 2005).

One interesting feature of these early study-abroad cases of elementary school students is that they are sent for the purpose of learning English, as shown in the report of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2006). In other words, those elementary school kids have been sent over for a period of one or two years mainly to acquire English. Most of the elementary school students who were sent abroad headed for English-speaking countries, typically North America.

The statistical report of the Ministry of

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Education and Human Resources Development (2006) shows that nearly 70% (24,199) of the total 35,144 elementary school students who went abroad in the 2005 school year left South Korea for English-speaking countries – including those in Southeastern Asia, such as Singapore and the Philippines. Almost half of those bound for foreign countries flew to North America; the US saw 34.6% of the students (12,171) and Canada greeted 12.6% (4,426).

The report also shows that almost 70% of the elementary early study-abroad cases stayed abroad for less than two years, and most of them (86.5%) returned from English-speaking countries. Almost half of the returnees, 6,568 students out of 13,586 in total, were from North America. This percentage, again, implies that young Korean children have been sent abroad for a short-term purpose – that is, second-language learning, mostly English.

The fear of the Korean language

The increasing number of young children sent abroad no doubt reflects the current English fever in South Korea, but another ideology at work here is a strong antipathy, or even fear, of the negative influence of the Korean language on the acquisition of English (J-K. Park, 2007). That is, that there is a strong belief that any kind of first-language influence slows down the acquisition of a second language as noted in Auerbach, 1993, and Tse, 2001.

This strong antipathy toward first language influence has brought about many extreme practices related to second-language acquisition, including the 'linguistic surgery' mentioned above as well as the phenomenon of 'wild goose families', where a single parent, usually the mother, stays in the foreign country for their children's education. This antipathy toward first-language influence has also resulted in a harsh attitude towards first-language peers in second-language environments (J-K. Park, 2007). Korean parents try hard to send their children to a school with few or zero Korean students, as they wish to avoid situations where their children play with other Korean students in and out of school. Many people simply assume that Korean children's failure to learn English, or their behavioral problems in English-speaking countries, come from their association with Korean peers who use only Korean. An example of this comes from a weekly magazine about first-language peer influence in 'early study abroad'. The writer talks about a student who was still taking ESL courses after years in the United States because the student hung around Korean friends and spoke Korean with family members (S-Y. Kim, 2000).

Many Korean parents' attitudes suggest that the core of their beliefs is 'English-only' and the 'critical period' argument. In other words, many Koreans strongly believe that English-only instruction without any first-language influence is the best way to learn English, and that younger children learn English faster than adults (J-K. Park, 2007). Such beliefs are also widely expressed in the mass media, thus reinforcing the rather blinkered views of many such parents.

Conclusion

These days, an increasing amount of money is being spent on English education in South Korea. Young children have been sent to foreign countries for the acquisition of English. This current English boom in South Korea is rooted in Korea's so-called 'education fever,' originating from the combination of the country's long tradition of Confucianism and new egalitarian ideas from the West after the collapse of the old class system (Seth, 2002). Since the 1990s, this 'education fever' has made English the most powerful vehicle to achieve success in South Korea.

Starting with a series of governmental policies in the early 1990s, the traditional 'education fever' has adopted a new face called 'English fever.' Korean parents have sent their children to English-speaking countries for the acquisition of English while they are still young, even under the age of ten. Although many experts warn that this 'early study-abroad' trend may cause a variety of problems in the children's emotional/psychosocial, linguistic, and academic development, more and more Korean parents want to send their children to foreign countries for the acquisition of English.

'English-only' is the most important expression that comes to mind for Koreans when learning English. Consequently, Korean parents have come to develop a strong antipathy toward Korean language influence from South Korea, making their children have 'linguistic surgery' when they are still in their infancy. Their feelings against the Korean language's

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influences have led them to put their children in schools abroad with few-to-zero Korean peers.

These Korean parents' 'English fever' may have dangerous consequences for the balanced development of their children. Many children sent abroad to English-speaking countries experience emotional problems as well as linguistic and academic difficulties (e.g., M. Kim, 2006; J-K. Park, 2007, 2008). Since we have little long-term research on the development of young children in the second language environment, these excessive parental efforts in pushing their children to learn English are a cause for concern, as many parents remain seemingly unaware of the need for a balanced approach to bilingual learning at the level of the individual child. ■

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