

# Why does English spread in global academia?

The [Linguistic Ethnography Forum's e-seminar](#) devoted to Ingrid Piller's recent book [Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice: An Introduction to Applied Sociolinguistics](#) is currently running. Some discussions so far are concerned with the use of English as a medium of instruction in global education, and I would like to expand on the spread of English as the medium of global academia here. I would like to argue that it is important to approach the spread of English as medium of global education by looking beyond language *per se* to account for macro-social forces that significantly yet covertly influence decisions on language use. I will also consider how our publishing choices relate to the global spread of English.

To show that language choice is not primarily a question of language, I will focus on the spread of English-medium lectures in Korean universities as an example: in 2011 global media reported the suicides of four students and one professor at an elite Korean university. The media blamed these tragedies on the university's language policy of conducting classes in English only. These media reports motivated us (Piller & Cho, 2013) to investigate the more fundamental question of what drives the zealous pursuit of English in Korean higher education.

The findings of our research show how the powerful ideology of neoliberalism can serve as a covert language policy, where market capitalism combines with academic capitalism. Since the neoliberal turn of Korea during the 1997-8 Asian Economic Crisis, improving competitiveness has become a mandate for Koreans, who endured immense social suffering during the crisis (e.g., massive unemployment, family breakups and suicides). In this context, English came to be seen as a key to competitiveness. While English as a competitive advantage may seem a common-sense approach given the global status of English, the Korean case demonstrates that the spread of English is inextricably linked with capitalist expansion.

English-medium lectures are important for local universities as they are mandated to compete for global excellence, which is tied to profits from increasing numbers of foreign students and government grants. Moreover, English-medium lectures are directly related to university rankings conducted by mainstream media. These rankings annually assess Korean universities according to set criteria with English-medium lectures being one of the key components to measure institutional internationalization. While other criteria such as research, learning environment and social reputation of graduates require time to produce measurable outcomes, increasing the number of classes taught in English can create instantaneous effects on the internationalization score and hence improve rankings almost immediately.

Universities are not the only institutions deriving a profit from English-medium lectures. For mainstream newspapers losing revenue due to increasing competition from online media, university rankings serve as a new source of revenue through production of special issues and university advertisement placements. This capitalist chain in which university and media interests are inextricably linked remains largely invisible to the public.

The spread of English as medium of instruction is widely seen as the result of the "free choices" of institutions and individuals who wish to better themselves and accordingly make personal choices as free market agents.

However, it usually goes unnoticed that these “personal choices” are not really choices but are made within a narrow set of options that are determined by market interests.

In the e-seminar, Ingrid raised the question of how to remedy disadvantage resulting from language policies in education. I believe that research aiming to investigate and expose the complex power relations behind English-medium lectures has an important role to play. However, all too often such research is not accessible to policy makers and other stakeholders. Our 2013 article demonstrating how neoliberalism works as a language-policy-setting mechanism in favour of English medium lectures, for instance, was published in *Language in Society*, a sociolinguistic academic journal published in English. Although our article is [available for open access from Cambridge University Press](#), the language of publication means, in effect, that our research follows the same logic that we describe for English-medium lectures. While we do not derive a direct financial benefit from publishing in English, we derive profits of distinction and reputation that may enhance our careers.

How can our research make a difference when it is published in English in an international sociolinguistics journal that is only read by fellow sociolinguists? Does it make sense to be critical of the global spread of English in education if we only publish that criticism in English? For us, the answer is no and we have been fortunate that [녹색평론 \(“The Green Review”\)](#), a progressive social policy journal in Korea, has just published our work about “English-medium lectures in Korean higher education” in Korean.

## References



Piller, I., & Cho, J. (2013). Neoliberalism as language policy *Language in Society*, 42 (01), 23-44. DOI: [10.1017/S0047404512000887](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404512000887)

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