

Warning: Global English may harm your mental health

About ten years ago an overseas student from South Korea who was about to fail a unit I was teaching left a suicide note under my office door. She described herself as a “loser” who – in contrast to other overseas students – hadn’t got enough English to cope with her course. She wrote how “guilty” she felt that her English wasn’t better and how her she had “betrayed” her parents with her poor English, as well as other people who cared for her, including myself as “a nice lecturer.” While it had never occurred to me to consider any of my students’ English in terms of “betrayal,” I was deeply shocked and tried to help in whatever small way I could. I know that she survived this particular bout of depression, but I don’t know what has become of her since as she withdrew from university shortly after and left Australia. I found the experience harrowing and I’ve often thought of her over the years. Her English had, in fact, met the university’s admission standards and so it was not her factual proficiency level in English that was her problem but her belief that her English was not good enough coupled with unrealistically high expectations as to what her English should be like. I hope that she has been able to rid herself of her obsession and found happiness in some non-English-related walk of life.

I was reminded of this young woman when I read a paper about Korean early study abroad students and their families in the current issue of the [International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism](#). The author, Juyoung Song, writes about a “Korean education exodus” with more and more children leaving South Korea temporarily for *chogi yuhak* (“early study abroad”) in the USA and other English-speaking countries. In 2006, 29,511 Korean elementary to high school students pursued education visas, with around half of these of elementary school age. Furthermore, these numbers do not include children who accompany their parents, i.e. where the reason for the visa is some parental activity. Overall, more than 40,000 Korean children seem to be living abroad in order to pursue an early English education and to acquire that “perfect accent.” The typical pattern is apparently for these children to be accompanied by their mothers while the fathers stay behind to support their children’s foreign education. So widespread is the pattern that there is a special term for this type of family formation: *kiregi kajok* or “geese family” – like geese, they fly every now and then to see each other.

When I was a child my father, who worked as a construction worker, was often away from home for extended periods and I remember well how much I missed him. Consequently, I’ve always considered the early separation of children from their parents a particularly poignant aspect of labor migration. It had never occurred to me that economically secure parents would **choose** separation because they thought it was in the best interest of their children. Isn’t it amazing that the allure of English is such that people are willing to trade close family bonds for high levels of proficiency? Not only family bonds as a matter of fact, one of the mothers in the study is quoted as being upset about the fact that her young daughter’s best friend during her study abroad year in the USA was another Korean girl and that they spoke Korean with each other. This mother felt cheated of her investment into her daughter’s English proficiency.

Happiness for the mothers interviewed by Song was tied to a good return on their investment as measured by their children’s English proficiency, and particularly their accent. One mother had this to say:

English is the place where you can see a close correlation between the money you spend and the improvement of children’s learning. The more you spend, the more efficient the learning. Yes, especially

when the children are young, the amount of money spent in their English education is visible, which makes me happy. (p. 30)

Sounds like a special brand of shopaholic to me – learning English as a particular form of consumption addiction! Seeing that in 2002 the South Korean English language teaching industry, excluding *chogi yuhak*, was worth around 3 billion USD according to [an LA Times report](#) and assuming that that figure has undoubtedly grown since then (according to Song, *chogi yuhak* figures grew seven times between 2000 and 2006), the comparison with a drug market feels not entirely inappropriate. The craze for English is such that there is even a market for plastic surgery, lingual frenectomy, to supposedly improve English pronunciation.

A language learning market that looks pretty saturated can only continue to grow if addiction is built into the system. How do you become addicted to language learning? Make the goal seem magical and, at the same time, impossible to reach! That is where the other language ideology identified by Song comes in: linguistic self-depreciation. Apparently, for all their investments into English language teaching and learning, South Koreans feel that their English is terrible and that English language teaching in the country is hopeless. One mother spoke of herself as a “frog in the well” because of her poor English; another one said her husband had only “two words of English” – the man with the “two words of English” worked as a researcher at a US university, mind you.

Being in thrall to an English language teaching industry that is so rampant that it makes people value proficiency in English more than family relationships and that is geared to instilling a perpetual sense of inferiority is surely a recipe for great profits on the one hand and significant mental health risks on the other. Sadly, the recipe is not restricted to South Korea but – with variations – seems to be working well in many places around the world.



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