# English Education for Young Children in South Korea: Not Just a Collective Neurosis of English Fever!

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*The aim of this article is to rethink English education for young children in South Korea through exploring a great variety of complex, interrelated terrains in terms of its emergence and popularity in an era of globalisation. I critically examine the relevance of discursive and non-discursive conditions derived from social, political, economic, and cultural forces, for the current emphasis of early childhood education, with special reference to English education for young children in South Korea. This is expected to provide international readers with an understanding of the significance of reconceptualising early childhood English education in countries where English is not the native language, considering its complicated (re) constructions through power relations embedded in its constitutive discourses. Drawing on Foucault's notions of governmentality and Bhabha's term hybridity, this article explores a set of discourses, such as instrumentalism, developmentalism, and cosmopolitanism, pertinent to the reproduction of the social conditions and, simultaneously, to the constitution of subjects around English education. By politicising early childhood English education in South Korea, I argue that it has not emerged out of a "collective neurosis of English fever" (Kim, 2002), but is a discursively constructed product in a particular timespace.*

**Keywords:** reconceptualisation; English education; English as a foreign language; South Korea; English kindergarten; governmentality; hybridity

## Introduction

With a growing influx of people from different countries, by and large resulting from international marriage and foreign migration, South Korean society, believed to have been homogeneous in its ethnicity, culture, and language (Shin, 2006) before the 1988 Seoul Olympics triggered the rise in international migration, is witnessing an increase in the number of children from multicultural families, as well as those speaking foreign languages in the classroom (Kim, 2007). When it comes to the background of the gained popularity of English education for young children in the context of Korean society, South Korea ranked first in the world in regard to the estimated consumer expenditure on private education of English language, reaching 10 trillion won (US $8.6 billion) in 2006 (Kim, 2006; Ma, 2007). It is reported that every year the amount that parents spend on their children's English education drastically increases (Chang, 2008).

Reflecting the national passion for learning English, there have been a great number of studies about English education in early childhood. However, according to Ma's (2007) analysis of research trends in this field, most of the published work is directed toward phenomenological and experimental research that explains the state of English education in South Korea or assesses its instructional methods and effects on other abilities of children (e.g. the level of fluency and listening skill in English language, and development of Korean language).

Compared to the large volume of methodological studies in the field of English education in South Korea, the discussion and problematisation of constitutive discourses and paradigms in English education have been relatively marginalised in current educational research in the country (Park, 2009). Furthermore, there are few studies that place English education for young children in a complex social arena that investigate ways that children become the subjects of government in a pedagogical space. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine how young children in South Korea, particularly those in preschool to early elementary school, are socially and historically constituted, by mapping the present looks of early childhood English education at the intersection of the global, national, and local levels.

More specifically, the aim of this conceptual paper is to rethink English education for young children in South Korea through a great variety of complex, interrelated terrains of its emergence and popularity in an era of globalisation. To do this the paper explores a set of discourses pertinent to the reproduction of the social conditions and, simultaneously, to the constitution of subjects around English education. Drawing on seminal concepts and ideas derived from poststructural and postcolonial thinkers, such as Foucault and Bhabha, I delineate early childhood English education as a historical and cultural product whose formation is mediated by the interactions of multiple discourses.

Korean English education for young children emerges in a particular historical and cultural context while being discursively conceptualised and made intelligible under "the regime of truth"[1] (Foucault, 1977) regarding language learning in early childhood. In other words, the emergence of English education for young children is not just a societal issue that any single event or paradigmatic change in a global society has generated. It is no more than an emblem of complicity, consensus, and dissension among those who compete under power relations. The next section provides a rationale for the use of guiding epistemological and conceptual tools derived from the poststructural and postcolonial ideas, followed by the explication of the hybridising process of English in a globalising era and its resultant worldwide exigency for English education in early childhood.

## Implementing Foucault and Bhabha in English Education for Young Children

Considering the paucity of poststructural and postcolonial research on English-as-a-foreign/second-language education in South Korea, I draw on the work of Foucault and Bhabha in order to undo the regime of truth (Foucault, 1977) in English-as-a-foreign/second-language education for young children in South Korea and beyond. Here, I employ the concept of 'the regime of truth' since my paper intends to problematise the regime of truth that hampers our questioning of what has been taken for granted in regard to early childhood English education in South Korea. Also, concepts such as governmentality and hybridity, derived from their ideas, are used to reconceptualise early childhood English education by bringing to the fore political rationalities inscribed in the discourses by which it is constituted.

Power, in a Foucauldian sense, "can be productive, positive, enabling, and empowering" (Ingram, 2005, 261-262) as it "traverses and produces things, …induces pleasure [and] forms of knowledge, [and] produces discourses" (Hall, 1997, 49-50). Extending from this notion of power, governmentality, also called 'the art of government,' is the way in which sovereign power is exercised in and through individual bodies, targeting the population as its object by way of the apparatus of security as its mechanism (Blackman & Maynard, 2008; Deacon, 2005; Foucault, 1991).

In regard to the term hybridity, I assert that some of the effects of colonial power results in "the production of hybridisation rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions" (Bhabha, 1994, 112). The process of exercising this colonising power subsequently makes the positions of the coloniser and colonised unstable and flexible. According to Bhabha (1994), the power relations between the coloniser and colonised are characterised by their ambivalence. However, he interprets the ambivalent locus of the hybridity as productive and procreating other possibilities. In the equivocal hybridising process transpiring in the interstices between Korean particularities and Western, or more specifically US- or UK- centred, knowledge of early (language) education, hybrid knowledge is produced. Drawing on Foucault's ideas on the 'productive' nature of power, I presuppose that power relations under linguistic, cultural imperialism are not necessarily static but are fluid.

1 The term "regime of truth" is defined by Foucault, as "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned… [and] the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1977, 131). By this term, I mean a set of truths that that govern ways of learning and teaching English in early childhood education.

## English as a Global Lingua Franca?

When it comes to the nature of power in the English language and its (in)direct effects on society, there are two different strands of thought on the persistence of English ascendancy and the cessation or diminishing effect of its power. On the one hand, whether or not the global vogue of the English language is in immediate danger (Graddol, 2000), English is viewed as a global lingua franca for people of different mother tongues to communicate with each other all over the world. The spread of English reflects the hegemonic power of a dominant language over other languages and cultures (House, 2003). One of the criticisms against this phenomenon is presented by the phrase 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson, 2003). Considering that "English linguistic imperialism is one sub-type of linguicism" (Phillipson, 2003, 55) and that linguicism simply refers to discrimination on the basis of language, the idea of English linguistic imperialism indicates that English education functions as a site for the unequal allocation of power vis-à-vis English proficiency – at least, in South Korea (Lee, 2010; Park, 2006).

On the other hand, some counterarguments contend that English will eventually be replaced by other language(s), for a global language (Graddol, 2000), or that English will become hybridised into different Englishes through glocalising processes in diverse cultural contexts (Crystal, 1998). Here, the notions of 'different Englishes' and glocalisation reject the claim that the dominance of English simply homogenises the world regardless of regional diversity and eventually transmits the hegemonic ideology, especially of the US, among English speaking countries (Graddol, 2000). Rather, they presuppose that English undergoes the process of hybridisation in contact with local diversity. Graddol (2000) argues that such language contact is "an important driver of change" (6). In this way, it is changed into different forms of English without reliance on standard American English (Lippi-Green, 2003) as a centre of authority that controls, for example, the form of English used in South Korea.

Having said that, I support the contention that English becomes hybrid through its contact with other languages and cultures, while rejecting Gramsci's (1971) sense of the hegemonic power of English. The notion of hegemony is based on the conceptualisation and perpetuation of the dominant and dominated language binary. In other words, neither the notion of the sovereignty of the English language nor Korean cultural uniqueness intact from English education is upheld in this article. More exactly, the focus of this article lies in how the English language has held sway as a vehicular language circulating discourses, in conjunction with nationalist endeavour for their own benefit, and how children are shaped as subjects through English education in South Korea. Therefore, in this article, complicity and dissension between different stakeholders in undertaking and maintaining English education for young children is examined at the matrix of historical and discursive intersections. The next section discusses how children's English education in South Korea has been configured at historical and discursive intersections and provides the articulations of three identified discourses: instrumentalism, developmentalism, and cosmopolitanism.

## Locating English Education in South Korea at Historical and Discursive Intersections

Korean traditional Confucian values have intermingled with western ideological and social principles and rules in having formed the conception of education for children. They are rooted in ancient Chinese Confucianism and have motivated Koreans to consider education "the best way to attain wisdom and virtue" and to achieve "political and financial success" (Hurh, 1998, 94).

In addition to Confucianism, which forms the rudiments for Koreans' pursuit of good education, the continued impact of colonialism presently serves as a ground for popularity and exigency of English education, since British imperialism and American expansionism established English as a colonial language (Graddol, 2000; Spring, 1998). Though Korea has never been physically occupied by American or British colonial power, globalisation has unremittingly implicated and reinforced Western colonial power on South Korea which has been transformed into a form that is neither directly physical nor appearing overtly threatening.

Thus, the English language has sustained its instrumentality for the operation and dissemination of *symbolic power* (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991); it has enabled one to change the actions of others who have less symbolic power. As Lee (2010) argues, English in South Korea functions as "a symbolic measure of one's competence and is associated with job success, social mobility, and international competitiveness" (247). English education maintains the privileges of those who have English proficiency as symbolic capital and reproduces social stratification (Lee, 2010).

Acknowledging the complexity of social, political, economic, and cultural landscapes grounding early childhood English education in South Korea, I identify and elaborate on the interwoven discourses, including, but not limited to, instrumentalism, developmentalism, and cosmopolitanism, which set in motion a system of reasoning (Popkewitz, 1998) for a mastery of, or at least familiarisation with the English language.

## Children as Human Capital: Instrumentalism

On top of the widely perceived role of education as an instrument for one's success and the elevated status of the English language in a global society, the close relation between education and the global economy has also led to the conceptualisation of education as a means of social investment for students identified as human resources or human capital with instrumental values, for economic growth (Spring, 1998). The understanding of education within the context of the global economy is focused primarily on the nature of its instrumentality, for it assumes that education is intentionally designed to transform students into useful resources (or objects) equipped with English skills, a set of cultural knowledge, and cosmopolitan identities. To this end, their cultivated qualities are expected to eventually contribute to boosting the economic growth of the nation. Thus, education functions as an apparatus for fabricating children as subjects of the government through the transmission of certain knowledge to them.

By globalisation, the world has witnessed an influx of migrating people, of information, of capital, and of a global economy, to name a few (Castells, 1996). As international free trade is greatly dependent on English, it stands as the primary language of the global society (Spring, 1998). For this reason, the Korean economic system, in its tight interconnection with the global economy, has set the stage for human resources to be well-armed with a basic, yet powerful, linguistic weapon, namely, English. Hence, the Lee government has attempted to incorporate into the public education system both English immersion programs and English proficiency tests as its fundamental components. According to the National Human Resource Development Plan (2006) of South Korea, children's English communication skills are viewed as the primary way of developing human resources in a globalising era (7).

English, as a tool, also internationally circulates modernist knowledge and discourses.

It is often said that the dominance of English as a colonising technology culminates in civilising the so-called Other, less civilised, often non-Western, cultures by infusing the minds of their people with the Western, modernist knowledge and truths. Through the development of Western modes of life and reasoning as part of a process of modernisation in other non-Western countries, modern individuals with 'an English mindset' exhibit Western/American ways of thinking, behaving and feeling.. As children gain English language skills as their cultural capital in English kindergartens (Park, 2009), they are transformed into useful and usable human capitals with productive efficiency, which is how social structures are reproduced by means of early childhood English education in South Korea (Bourdieu, 1986). In particular, the discourse of developmentalism (Baker, 1999), which authorises child development knowledge as a guiding principle for education, underlies the widespread recognition that early childhood is the most opportune and effective period of time for second language acquisition.

Having said this, global discourses of instrumentalism and developmentalism, which have appealed to scientifically-inflected modern minds to encourage early childhood English education, are negotiated with nationalism. Korean nationalist rage for a global leading position and Korean exceptionalism[2] leads

2 Lee (2010) explains that Korean exceptionalism is based on the notion that "Korea is unique and exceptional" (23).

to artfully making use of the rationale of human capital theory that has been a justification for objectifying children as human capital and scaling down the major role of education as social investment in a technical term.

Nationalist reasoning ascribed to by bureaucrats and policymakers complies with and sanctions the way of conceptualising children as human capital. This results in tempering antipathy against the English language centred on children's learning. For example, President Lee Myung-Bak strongly argued for the significance of English learning, saying, "Among non-English-speaking countries, those using English are richer than other nations."[3] As evidently expressed in his speech, the South Korean government is poised to vigorously promote English language learning as its national goal. The Lee government's urge to promote English education for its access to cutting-edge global leadership resonates with nationalist tactics of reconciliation with global power for the sake of the nation. English learning from early childhood for the purpose of infusing and developing the qualities of a cosmopolitan child is currently more fortified than before. With the globally and nationally heightened status of English, South Koreans view English education as the fastest, most secure way to achieve upward mobility in social class.

## Child Development Knowledge:Developmentalism

The role of the mother tongue in successful L2 (second language acquisition) acquisition has been academically acknowledged as Cummins (1984), in his developmental interdependent hypothesis, contended that children's competence in L2 is determined upon the acquisition of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) skills in L1. Despite the finding about positive associations between L1 (first language acquisition) and L2, Koreans tend to have "a strong antipathy, or even fear, of the negative influence of the Korean language on the acquisition of English" (Park, 2009, 55) on account of the firm belief that L1 delays the development of L2 (Park, 2009; Tse, 2001). Consequently, adopting English as an official language or even mother tongue has been increasingly supported in Korean society (Chae, 2003). Ignition and reinforcement by current president Lee's pro-English education policy which implements English immersion programs in public schools, complies with American/western hegemonic power in the postcolonial condition.

Early childhood education in South Korea and elsewhere is saturated with the conceptualisation of childhood as a sensitive period for multiple developmental domains, which has been formulated by the discourse of developmentalism tied to the notion of progress (Baker, 1999), underlying a set of knowledge related to child development and developmental psychology. Developmentalism has globally circulated and travelled to South Korea, recreating particular reasoning in the context of Korean society. By virtue of the imposition of a set of rigorous scientific standards and assumptions in children's developmental domain, the term *sensitive period* or even *critical period* is often preferred in the discussion of children's L1 and L2 (Birdsong, 1999) in South Korea while it is also criticised for its insufficient attention paid to the impact of social contexts. The epithet "childhood is a critical/sensitive period (for learning a language)" has expanded and authorised the statement "the earlier, the better" that has reached the level at which it is regarded as common sense (McLaughlin, 1992). In this manner, child development and psychological knowledge that maps the state of a child vis-à-vis the pre-set, universal nature of a child has reverberated in the field of English education, as well as early education in general (Bloch, 2000).

Given the discursive and socio-political situations that have generated the exigency of early English learning, South Korean parents' excessive hope of trend-setting education for their children's success has been a long-lasting social issue (Lee, 2002; Lee, 2009). Due to this widespread zeal for education, Gang Nam has become the longed-for district by most of South Koreans, which refers to the southeast areas of Seoul and is also known for their high-end real estate and its abundance of leading private educational institutions called 'hagwon.' Attending a good hagwon is believed to lead to admission to one of the top-notch universities in Korea (Ahn, 2006).

3 한겨레 (The Hankyoreh). (2008). *Lee Myung-bak urges participation in English-language education initiatives.* Available online at: http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/267073.html

After many different methods of English education (such as hagwon or private tutoring) being sought for young children, English kindergarten stands as a strategically designed space where children are expected to naturally pick up knowledge transformed by English. Interestingly, an English kindergarten is classified as a hagwon, not as a formal early childhood educational institute, by the Ministry of Education, which means that it does not have to follow the national kindergarten curriculum. This further ensures that those affiliated with formal early educational programs preserve their vested interests under the protection of the law. In this respect, English kindergarten has emerged out of globally and nationally dispersed demands and local dissensions among different stakeholders with competing interests. English education for South Korean children is thus formed as a culturally hybrid space.

Coupled with the national, societal needs for developing human resources in order that the nation comes into prominence in the global, political, and economic competitions, the individual desire for upward mobility in social class and the conviction of child development knowledge culminates in the popularity of English education from very early years, even at tremendous costs[4]. Children's English skills are often associated with the corresponding success in their lives. It is not uncommon that Korean parents send or are eager to send their children to English kindergarten in spite of its considerably high tuition fees. As Park (2009) pointed out, elitism as a discourse pervasive in Korean society also sustains (and is circulated through) English education, mediating between parents' desire for upward mobility and the nation's urge towards global leadership. To this end, even the desire and demand for English language learning are initiated and forged at the crossroads of multiple discourses including instrumentalism (human capital theory), developmentalism (child development knowledge), elitism, and cosmopolitanism.

## *Cosmopolitanism*

Another global discourse that I suggest constitutes early childhood English education in South Korea is cosmopolitanism. The basic premise of the discourse is that a cosmopolitan citizen should demonstrate certain capabilities, such as knowledge of different cultures, English language competency, respect for difference and diversity, and the like (Popkewitz, 2008). According to the Korean Presidential Committee on Education Innovation (2007), these qualities of a world citizen are enunciated in the educational policies of the Lee Myung-Bak government (Change, 2008; Kim, 2006). The system of reason ordered by the cultural theses of a cosmopolitan child and its mode of life enclosed in early childhood English education is "cultivate[d], develop[ed], and enable[d]" by pedagogy (Popkewitz, 2008, 17) at English-language educational sites such as English kindergartens.

With the dramatic increase in the number of English kindergartens, their English immersion curriculum appears to inculcate children with Western cultural knowledge by using learning materials, such as picture books and animation movies, which, for the most part, were made in the USA or UK. Here, it is through postcolonial effect that young children's English education in South Korea is over-reliant upon methodological ideas derived from western-centred learning theories and educational resources produced by the USA or UK, as if they are universally applicable educational methods and materials for English language learning, without considering other influential factors (Park, 2009). You (2008) asserts that educational materials for early childhood English education play the role of insidiously conveying the particular ideology held by the Western culture. Most videotapes Korean children watch for their English learning at home, kindergartens or day care centres are Disney animation movies that have been criticised as inscribing Western-centred, capitalist and culturally imperialist ideologies (Bryman, 2004; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1984; Giroux, 2001; You, 2008). However, formulated by the encounter of global discourses with Korean historical and contextual particularities, the regime of truth about English education in South Korea (i.e. English proficiency as a requirement of human capital and a global citizen and the statement 'the earlier, the better') is produced as hybrid within asymmetrical power relations.

4 The high expenditure on children's English education is demonstrated on page 2 as the numerical results of the reports (Chang, 2008; Kim, 2006; Ma, 2007) suggest.

Recently, the Disney and Nickelodeon animations and learning materials imported from the US for South Korean children's English education in local settings are inclined to emphasise "a cosmopolitan identity which shows tolerance of race and gender differences, genuine curiosity toward and willingness to learn from other cultures, and responsibility toward excluded groups within and beyond one's society" (Hargreaves, 2003, xix). For example, the animation movie 'The Princess and the Frog' released in 2009 features the Disney's first ever black princess named Tiana with attempt to transform the pervasive image of feminine beauty traditionally characterised as a white, rich, blond, blue-eyed, young girl dressed in pink. Tiana's dream is not just to marry a prince like Mulan, another Disney's princess character, who was a warrior in the movie. These characters represent cosmopolitan citizens with "universal qualities that are to enable personal fulfillment in an equitable world" (Popkewitz, 2008, 116). South Korean children today are thus more exposed to these cultural theses of cosmopolitanism than ever as their English education rests on the use of these materials. In other words, the qualities of a reasonable person who holds a global mind and rational behaviour are thus inculcated.

## Conclusion

To sum up, English education for young children in South Korea has been discursively produced within complex social, economic and political circumstances. While its construction is largely indebted to global discourses such as instrumentalism, developmentalism, and cosmopolitanism, Korean historical and ideological particularities transform them into a form of hybridity. Under tutelage of the government's English education policy, South Korean children are constituted and embody the form of the governing power by means of the interactions and concessions among interwoven global, national, and local knowledge. These sets of knowledge concern instrumental values of children, child development, and the mode of cosmopolitan modernity. This is how governmentality operates on the population for the prosperity and security of the state.

For this reason, the national obsession with English should be understood in a broader context. English education embodies the will to power in that English is not so much a linguistic tool for communication but is rather symbolic power itself (Bourdieu, 1991). The population is subjected to English learning from the early years for the sake of national prosperity and individual well-being, governed within the systems of reason that orders who the children are and should be (Popkewitz, 1998). In other words, English education for young children envisions a child who grows up to be a cosmopolitan citizen demonstrating English language competency. The hybrid body of a child that internalises a cosmopolitan mind and Koreanness is fabricated through the "double gestures of the hopes of future progress and fears of the dangers and dangerous populations to the future" (Popkewitz, 2009, 255).

The governing practices of the population in English education are transferred into the individual consciousness of self-governing. Though English kindergarten is provided by the private sector, the starting age for English learning has been lowered since the government publicised and strengthened English education for children. This is how governmentality operates while historically and discursively constituting early childhood English education alongside continuously changing material conditions. Mapping English education for young children at the intersection of discourses and cultures can further direct attention to a "context-driven teaching practice" (Amin & Ramrathan, 2009, 76). After all, early childhood English education in South Korea has not emerged out of a collective neurosis of English fever, but is a discursively constructed product in a particular timespace.

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