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A MISMATCH OF IDEALS: THE AILS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION POLICY IN SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

Despite several modifications in English education policy over many years in South Korea, there seems to be no discernable improvement in language ability. This problem has been investigated empirically by researchers domestically and internationally, with no consensus as to the underlying issue. This paper attempts to pivot the discussion to a more philosophical position by approaching the issue from a policy viewpoint. The overall aims of education, foreign language learning aims, as well as South Korea's relationship with English education is examined. The fundamental concern is the mismatch between how society views English to how English education policy is enacted. Specific suggestions are then made regarding the ways in which policy makers can adjust their approaches to meet the needs of societal expectations of English proficiency. It is hoped that from a narrowing of insight from the macro-view of education at large to the specific problem in Korea will lead to changes in policy for the better.

Keywords:

Educational Aims, Foreign Language Aims, ESL, English Education Policy, English Ideologies

1. Introduction

An ongoing debate among teachers, parents, and administrators at every educational level in South Korea (henceforth Korea) is the reason why there has been little to no improvement of Koreans' speaking proficiency in English (Brown, 1990, as cited in Lee, 2021). Many households willingly spend an immense amount of money to send children to special schools, hire private tutors, and purchase the latest applications and interactive programs, all in the name of improving English skills. It also seems every few years a new nationwide government policy is enacted that will surely crack the code in the elusive mystery of language acquisition. However, the debate continues as to the most efficient and conducive ways to improve English education. Despite the unquenchable desire for English language mastery, there seems to be a very important missing piece to the overall language policy puzzle.

Research regarding this very question has been conducted domestically as well as internationally from language experts, educationalists, and businesses that could fill a small library. The type of research conducted, whether quantitative or qualitative, and the methodologies used within those realms, has led to no agreement in how to solve the issue of English education. Jung (2020) has recently argued that Korea has a very rough road ahead in terms of education policy given major changes in technology, labor, and industry. These changes not only affect basic education, but influence how language education should be taught in a widening world. The roles of government, schools, and parents are in dire need of reevaluation to meet the needs of these rapid changes.

What would seem to be a spoil of riches in the interest of further inquiry into the betterment of English education in Korea, has become a jumble of conflicting ideas and opposing ideologies. In determining education policy, certain ideologies have influenced and shaped how the country has approached English education, regardless of the cultural norms and psychological mindset ubiquitous in society. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the underlying issues that have led to the mismatch between societal expectations of English fluency and actual policy of English education in Korea. Research from practitioners focusing on acquisition issues, linguistic differences, and other extraneous factors is already plentiful. This paper will take a philosophical viewpoint in the attempt to create a new conversation about English education policy in Korea. A macro view of the aims of education will be discussed first to get an overall understanding of what

education means for students. Then the focus will be narrowed to the specific aims of foreign language education, culminating in a look at how Korea enacts English language policy. It is hoped from this narrowing of understanding, from what education should do to how it is handled in an EFL context in Korea, can create a more focused insight into the problem of policy as it relates to English language education.

2. Literature Review

One of the most hotly debated topics within education, and more specifically in the field of philosophy of education, is the explicit aim of education. John White (2010), an authority on education theory, believes a question to be asked before such an inquiry about aims should be what education actually is. One of the more general answers to the theory of education can be summed up as: the aim to "produce a certain type of person" (Moore, 2010). This is done by defining the concept of education as it pertains to the individual(s). The idea of shaping a person to act or to live in a certain fashion harkens back to the educational philosophy of Plato, where the focus was on producing a certain kind of person to lead society. The benefit of such a model is the ease with which standard practices and morals can be distributed and shared across all fields of education. If the overall goal is to encourage and develop a certain kind of human in society, it would be simple to concoct a formula for multiple institutions to follow. A thought that immediately arises, however, is who this model person should be and who has chosen this to be the ideal.

Harris (1999) believes education "is a changing, contested and often highly personalized, historically and politically constructed concept". To his mind, painting a broad stroke of what education is for all would be a foolhardy endeavor given the cultural, social, economic, and political factors that influence how a society operates. "Aims, like all matters of policy, are contextual, political, normative, dynamic and contested" (Harris, 1999). The changing nature of society, especially with the rapid acceleration of technology and globalization, suggests the cultivation of an archetypal student could transform as quickly as society. To answer the question of what education is would fully require numerous layers dependent upon the where, when, why, and how the inquiry is being asked. How countries like Korea and Angola view education may not only be different, but diametrically opposed given the fact that each culture will desire certain outcomes from their citizens.

The notion of having an educational aim to begin with seems implicit in the act of commencing any activity. Why is one doing it? What purpose does it serve to do this activity? This goes for the act of educating students as well. Barrow (1999) feels the goals of learning should be a top priority of teachers, no matter how contested the idea of aims. It seems natural to place the goals of learning at the top of the list of priorities for every educator. However, some see the question of aims as too vague and too large to be able to answer in a satisfactory way. Standish (1999) has attacked the question of aims from a linguistic standpoint, comparing the ability to ask for the aims of education to asking for the aims of the existence of a town.

Despite the reservations in tackling such an enormous task of defining educational aims, experts still believe education should be aimed at something, regardless of the fact of what that something should be is still contested (White, 2010). Educationalist Paul Hirst (1999) has expressed the opinion that parents are the best equipped to find what the purpose of their children's studies should be.

"But as children's needs and interests become articulated and their capacities develop, they increasingly become the best judges of their own educational requirements. What matters throughout, however, is that rational choice, choice informed by practical reason, be made so as to further the construction of a good life for the individual throughout the whole enterprise. After all, education at all stages must be a rational practice" (p. 132)

The role of the educator in this context is one who imparts qualities of reason. Hirsh is of the belief that once the students are at a certain age and are practicing reasoned judgment, they are able to make choices for themselves.

Related to this idea of student autonomy is Christopher Winch's (1999) dynamic model, which is valuable to quote at length.

"Whatever independence people develop is to be exercised within the framework of a common interdependence if society is not to fragment into a mass of individuals, each of whom can only pursue their individual aims through constant friction with others who may be pursuing contrary goals. These reflections suggest three things. First, that people have to be independent to a certain degree in order to function in a society that expects individuals to work, raise families and take part in the democratic process. Second, since independent action involves association with others, there needs to be a

common core of rules, concepts, assumptions and propositions that allow such association to take place without too much misunderstanding. Third, since a complex society requires a division of labor, the preparation that each individual has for adult life cannot be identical. These are the constraints that surround any attempt to specify autonomy as an educational aim in a complex society" (p. 76)

The first step is simple enough in the promotion of individual persons to pursue their own goals and values. However, layered on top of the elevation of individuality is a framework of commonalities that people in the society should share. These could be moral, social, or economic rules that would keep the mass of individuals tied together. Again, the question arises as to who chooses the rules and propositions that everyone ought to follow. If one were to take Hirst's opinion, it would be left to the immediate community of parents, students, and teachers to make those choices for themselves. Winch's third suggestion about creating differentiated preparation for adult life seems to coincide with what was discussed previously regarding context-specific goal selection. There are many factors at play when deciding what is best learned and how to engage learners in such material.

In a rapidly changing world, it is extremely difficult to maintain a singular point of view of what education should do and what its aims should be. A priority appears to be placed on the time, location, and community involved with making educational choices that will impact individuals within the immediate population. Pring (2004) has noted that "once the teacher 'delivers' someone else's curriculum with its precisely defined 'product', there is little room for that transaction in which the teacher, rooted in a particular cultural tradition, responds to the needs of the learner". The people best suited to make curriculum choices are a combination of parents, children, and the community they live in. The aims of education can change from one semester to the next depending on the needs of the students and society as students navigate the many interesting topics school has to offer. One such subject in public schools where the aim of education has transformed significantly in the last 60 years is foreign language.

3. Aim of Foreign Language Education

Beginning in the twentieth century a turn to interpersonal communicative practicality was emphasized in the teaching of foreign languages that has continued until now. Byram (2008) has

noted the shift in the aims of language acquisition, from understanding "the high culture of great civilizations to aims of being able to use a language for daily communication and interaction with people from another country". Up until the twentieth century, one of the main reasons for learning a foreign language was the status it gave one in society. Cohen (2018) found the significance of being able to speak French in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England led to one being seen as a gentleman in polite society. As the twentieth century neared, a transformation in social makeup, cultural identity, and national character led to a change in language teaching and learning ideology. One such case was the rise in industrial society, causing enormous migrations into larger cities (Standish, 2014). The seemingly sudden turn from learning a foreign language as a signifier of one's respectability to learning a language for practicality can be tied with the sudden and swift technological advances of the time.

Under the umbrella of Communicative Language Learning the focus became competence in spoken communication for specific purposes. With a rise in faster and cheaper communication technology, a need for real-time communicative aptitude was desired. Instructors were now tasked with modernizing the curriculum to meet the needs of these rapid changes (Byram, 2008). Rather than learning a language for simply understanding high cultures, languages could be learned for a variety of other reasons. One justification that is heard frequently is to further understand the culture in which the target language is spoken. This has been seen as an implicit assumption, that being able to understand the language will equate to understanding the culture. Williams (1991) makes a distinction between three aspects of understanding when people refer to understanding a culture: the general way of society in terms of art and history, knowing the literature, and grasping the peculiar psychology of the people. He finds it doubtful that appreciation of a particular culture's visual arts, architecture, food, etc. is necessitated upon knowing the language of said culture. He argues there could be as deep an understanding of those aspects through one's native language. The same can be said of the second way of understanding, given the level of proficiency one would need to completely grasp and comprehend the nuances of the literature. When it comes to the third part, Williams (1991) concedes that "there is no doubt that language provides a very special perspective on the psychological orientation of different peoples and that knowledge of the language provides a fuller access to this orientation". However, he is still unconvinced of the complete necessity to know the language in order to understand the cultural psychology of a society, especially when it can be explained in one's native language.

Beyond the needs of individual purposes, societies as a whole recognized the utility of communicative competence as the desire for globalization began to heat up. The ability to speak a foreign language was now seen as a growing necessity amid changes in the labor market. "[It] is widely agreed that during the 1980s and 1990s there were important shifts in the conceptualization and the experience of work, reflecting the emergence of a deregulated, hyper-competitive, postindustrial, globalized economy" (Cameron, 2002). As companies began to expand beyond national borders, there was a need for workers to communicate across boundaries. Workers who could facilitate trade and commerce with new cultures in the global market were seen as valuable economic contributors. Yet some educationalists have expressed doubt to the claim that workers who know a foreign language contribute to the economic growth of the county. "This concern is reinforced by the well-meaning wishful thinking of those who believe that somehow acquisition of foreign language skills will make a dramatic contribution to economic growth" (Williams, 1991). While there can be no steadfast empirical data to either prove or disprove this idea, there is no doubt that knowing the language of the people one wishes to trade with is highly advantageous. As an example of such a concept, if a company were looking for a factory to outsource its production, with two similar bids from two different countries, the factory that could efficiently communicate with the main company would unquestionably be considered favorably for the contract.

As the economic sector began to put foreign language proficiency higher on their list of priorities for new workers, the education system soon followed.

"The growing importance of foreign language education in social, political and economic terms leads to more attention being paid to its efficiency. Investment of time in the formal curriculum of compulsory education and of money in the materials to support it, particularly the use of information and communication technology, calls for evaluation" (Byram, 2008)

An explosion of research into the best practices for teaching and learning a foreign language spread across the educational world. A utilitarian perspective was taken, whereby time invested in learning a language became quantifiable. Standish (2014) believes "utilitarianism presents us with a whole philosophy geared towards a certain kind of instrumentalism, a calculus for evaluating consequences and determining efficient means to the maximization of good outcomes". Education

for the enrichment of human life turned into a means-ends philosophy. The education of humans was not simply for individuals, but for the betterment of society as a whole.

Specifically, in Korea, the changes mentioned above swept through the country, leading to an ultra-utilitarian belief that language brought certain advantages economically and socially. "Korea's educational landscape shifted as structural and social phenomena emerged in response to globalization" (Beard, 2018). Particularly English was now seen as a language of power that could give one "social capital" to maintain or increase status in society (Beard, 2018). English tests became gatekeepers to enter coveted companies, bringing better repute to one's family. To this day, many companies require English proficiency tests, for example the TOEIC, from their workers regardless if they use English in their positions or not.

For students, learning English is seen as a vital stepping stone to more wealth and happiness. "English proficiency has been recognized as an ability that is required to enter better schools and to get better jobs by the majority of Koreans - from children to adult workers" (Jeon & Lee, 2017). This pressure to learn English has led to an explosion of after school academies promising to develop language abilities where public education fails to do so. Countless amounts of money and time has been spent in the hope of using English for ends unrelated to authentic communication. The view of English as a commodity has created an unnatural dichotomy between what society expects from English education and how the language is actually used.

4. ESL vs. EFL in Korea

Since the end of the Japanese occupation in Korea in 1945, Korea has seen a number of different language learning ideologies, usually all originating from outside Korea. What these ideologies had in common was that English should be used as a second language rather than a foreign language (Lee, 2021). Despite aspirations for an English as a Second Language (ESL) ideology, the country has pedagogically maintained an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perspective (Lee, 2021). The main distinction between what would be considered ESL as opposed to EFL is defined mainly by the environment of the learner. Learning English within a setting where the target language is used natively, as exemplified in India and the Philippines, is considered an ESL country. Day-to-day activities and tasks are conducted in either the native language or the second language. EFL countries, on the other hand, are typified by learning English

within a culture that does not use the language to a certain degree outside the classroom; a prime example being Japan (Brown, 2000).

Although the classifications of ESL and EFL seem pretty cut and dry, some scholars have taken issue with the simple distinction between the two models. Brown (2000) has stated that within the changing structure of English learning and teaching worldwide, it is a disservice to make blanket characterizations, especially with a growing base challenging the primacy of native speakers as knowledge bearers. For the purposes of this paper the general definitions will be used for two reasons: first, the clarity with which ESL and EFL are defined lend themselves accessible to clear analysis; and second, the stated definitions are still considered valid in the literature.

As Lee (2021) has shown in her historical-structural analysis of the differing ideologies that have permeated through Korea's English education field, the push from non-Korean pedagogues for an ESL setting has been at odds with the realities of the country. Her breakdown shows that from the end of World War II three major ideologies were enacted in Korea in the hope of enhancing English language ability: The United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGK), the Peabody/Korea Project, and the Peace Corps/Korea Program. All three promoted ESL principles in the hopes of transforming the country into using English more widely. Notwithstanding the efforts to push for massive cultural change, Korea never accepted the conversion socially. The remnants of those ESL ideologies have remained in the expectations of native-like fluency after a certain amount of time spent studying the language. The issue, however, lies in Korea continuing to inhabit the economic, social, and cultural realm of EFL. "Both ESL and EFL coexist in Korea, being parallel to each other: ESL in their ideological domain versus EFL in their practical domain" (Lee, 2021).

What Koreans think English should do for individuals and for the country as a whole is in stark contrast to the way in which it is approached methodologically and pedagogically. "English is taught as the most needed foreign language even though it is not officially used for school or business in a daily context" (Jeon & Lee, 2017). The expectation of proficiency within a context where the language is not widely used in everyday situations is ambitious but misguided. It is similar to one stating the desire to be a master carpenter, yet taking carpentry lessons on the weekends. It is possible to gain the skills necessary to be considered proficient in the profession from such lessons; however, the reality of the time needed to get to such an advanced level is not conducive to this goal.

In an ESL setting most if not all citizens would have an equal opportunity to not only learn the second language, but to practice it in meaningful contexts as well. However, Korea lies outside that purview as chances to learn English are not equal. Time and money spent on English education varies widely depending upon the opportunities given to certain members of society (Jeon & Lee, 2017). This continues the status of English as a gatekeeper for utilitarian concerns rather than, as expressed before, a way to enhance understanding of different cultures and genuine communication with others.

5. An Improved Policy

Some conclusions can be drawn by tying together the loose ends from the macro-view of the aims of education, foreign language education aims, to the micro-view of how Koreans view language education amid the realities in the culture. It is hoped that moving from each level of abstraction has led to a better understanding of the next. Only then can we get a complete picture of what should be prescribed for what ails English education policy. There are two main observations which will hopefully bring this topic from what has until now been an empirical prerogative to its rightful place as a philosophical one. The first deals with the overall aims, or lack thereof, of foreign language education in Korea. The second is the diametrically opposed values between the aspirations of English mastery in an environment that is not conducive to such a desire. A few suggestions will be discussed to improve policy during this exploration.

Considering English language education is couched under education as a whole in the public schooling system, it is entirely appropriate to set the subject within that pedagogical influence. This is to say that the aim of education has been determined to be a context-specific enterprise where choices in what matters in education are decided at the smallest possible level. Martin (2011) has expressed the social operation of education "find[s] that the interests and values defining [students] own life and community cannot simply be generalized across other communities". Korea thus needs to be clear about the explicit purposes of education, and more specifically English language education, that do not mimic and parrot what other countries espouse. It is not uncommon from many educational authorities around the world to use similarly vague language about competing in the 21st century, cultivating critical thinking, and other such maxims without any notion of what they really mean and how they will be achieved. Korea ought to take a long look inward to determine what language education should do for citizens and for their well-

being beyond what is globally fashionable. Martin (2011) says it best: "What one needs to flourish depends on all sorts of contextual features". These features cannot and should not be dictated from authorities which have little to no insight of the needs of a student population.

Another question of value needs to be raised in thinking about what English education means to the society at large. If institutions were true to their word in wanting students to achieve a certain level of proficiency in language classes, the curriculum would reflect that promise. Instead, the education system has created an arena of competition which assists only those who have the means to go outside the public education system to achieve that promise (Beard, 2018). A more honest look at the function of English in society should be raised. Some students will complete school, get jobs, and never use English communicatively through that whole process. Utilizing English tests as checkpoints between levels of ascension is not only unfair, but an abuse of the language. English is seen as an object to overcome to reach the next step in the economic process rather than a tool to employ in communicating with others. A conscious decision of how to approach English needs to be made, preferably from the local level of communities, rather than the historically top-down approach from companies. Bottery (2000) emphasizes that society "must empower a level of participation greater than that required purely for economic purposes; that it must help the next adult generation to vocalize and search for ways of creating the good society" (p. 2). To rid the bias of English as a stumbling block will take a reset in how it is approached in the classroom. Only when it is employed for enrichment of communication can it enhance students' lives.

6. Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper has at least started a new conversation regarding the question of Korea's mismatched English education policy. The complexity in realizing what has been suggested is duly noted, yet not unreasonably proposed. The goal of this brief examination of educational aims at multiple conceptual levels, from foreign language pedagogy to the specific view of English in Korea, leads one to look at the problems of policy in a more direct light than any analysis done empirically. Further exploration into the philosophy of education from a Korean viewpoint would enhance this investigation and would be greatly welcomed. The more light that is shined from various angles on the problem, the easier it will be to solve it.

It has been shown that the current conception of language education around the world is bent to a utilitarian perspective whereby language learning is seen as a practical activity for economic gain. This is especially true in Korea where learning English has been directly linked with socio-economic advancement, despite the lack of a comprehensive pedagogy for true proficiency. If this is the way in which Korea continues to approach English as a language of study, then the cultural mindset must align with the utilitarian perspective. Expectations of ESL-like proficiency within an EFL-minded system will continue to cause strife as the hope for true second language mastery remains unfulfilled. It is too much to demand so much from students who are not given the same opportunities that are afforded ESL countries, yet expect the same outcomes. On the other hand, if the education system follows the social desire for English proficiency, it would need a total restructuring of the way in which the language is taught in school. Rather than focusing on tests to get into university or to get jobs, a more intense turn to communicative competence would be needed. Among the two paradigm-shifting choices, the latter would be less obtrusive and relatively simpler to implement. Altering educational policy is a more straightforward task than changing the psychology of an entire culture. That being said, newlyenacted policy can have a direct and gradual influence on the thinking of a society, thus the second option being of more value.

Some basic adjustments in the approach to English instruction could potentially lead to a more productive learning atmosphere. Jang (2020) has expressed the need for differentiated levels according to ability. She sees a lack of efficiency in foreign language education as a direct result from institutions ignoring differences between students while conducting classes in a uniform way. Students with prior experience with the language should not be put in the same class as those with little to no experience. Each individual institution should be responsible for level testing and level assignments as the need arises. An argument against this proposal is the lack of standardization in what one level means in one institution to another. If a student were in an intermediate class at one school, it is not clear if the level would be convertible to an equivalent level at a different school. This seems more of an administrative complaint rather than one of actual ability. It would be the responsibility of institutions to do regular level testing to ascertain the suitability of student to class level. This system can be seen in the private education sector and some university campuses, but is not currently in operation in public schools.

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