When the Global and Local Meet:
Meanings of English in
‘Post-colonial’ South Korea

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This thesis attempts to unravel the “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973: 5) surrounding English in the local context of Seoul, South Korea, a country that spends close to two percentage of its GDP on English learning and mandates English learning from the third grade in all public schools. Using ethnographic field work conducted in Seoul, the thesis answers why South Koreans are such avid learners of English by closely focusing on Korean college students in the surrounding space of the Gangnam subway station. In contemporary, ‘post-colonial’ South Korea, English ability has evolved over time into a highly valued skill set in the local context that allows for social mobility and also a fetishized language of fantasy that gives individuals a sense of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and social status.

English learning has become highly ‘Koreanized’ to fit local needs, focusing on strategies for scoring high on standardized English tests. Underneath apparent enthusiasm towards English education is a growing negative reaction to the growth of importance of English in Korea, which surfaces all over popular media. Such public critique of the excessive English boom can be a double-edged sword that works to raise public awareness, but also reinforcing the notion that English is indeed important in Korean society and cannot be ignored. To most Korean college students, English learning – although virtually synonymous to the United States in the minds of Koreans – does not present an irreconcilable conflict between nationalism and globalization, nor does it signify a force of American cultural imperialism stripping away agencies of local agents.

**Keywords:** South Korean education, post-colonial studies, global English studies, globalization, American imperialism, localization
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In the Gangnam Subway Station in Seoul, South Korea, Exit 6 of that station is known to college students as the mecca of social life. A popular meeting spot of college students after classes, restaurants, bars, and stores lace the bustling streets outside this subway exit. Many of the college students walking around this exit carry around a noticeably square-shaped bag. Any observer of South Korea would notice that this bag is not carried around for reasons of fashion; it is certainly not a Louis Vuitton handbag or a North Face backpack, both considered fashionable among urban college students. This bag has the insignia of one of the three most well-known private English institutions (hakwon) in Seoul: Hackers, YBM, or Pagoda. This bag is a proud sign that one is a student at one of those three institutions by Gangnam Subway Station. Hakwons are some of the most important physical locations one can see the vibrancy of English education in Korea among college students.

South Korea only has one official language – Korean – but every South Korean begins learning English as a foreign language from third grade as part of the mandatory public education system (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology 2007). Since English is one of the core subjects tested at school, even included in the mandatory college entrance examination, English is a subject taken extremely serious by Korean students and parents, enough so that those familiar with Korea’s education system frequently notes that English and mathematics are the two most important subjects for success. Even if one is not an English major, a typical Korean college student continues
to study English for post-graduate employment or prestigious study abroad and scholarship opportunities. Because the commonly accepted proof of one’s English abilities in the Korean setting is a test score, many students attend such private English institutions for the sole reason of getting a high English test score. Because of this tendency, private English institutions – instead of promoting ‘real’ English learning – stresses ways to quickly attain high scores, which essentially means teaching strategies and tricks.

Clifford Geertz argued that interpreting culture involves searching the meanings of the “webs of significance” that humans have spun for themselves (1973:5). Then, why do these students study English at this location? Why do they openly carry this English hakwon bag? Why are they so enthusiastic about their English learning endeavors? These questions are the crux of this thesis that attempts to answer why South Koreans are such avid learners of English. To construe these ‘enigmatical’ social expressions means having to realize what English means in the lives of these college students (Geertz 1973). Students from all over Seoul or nearby suburban areas spend money and time to attend English institutions by Gangnam station. Although there are private English institutions all over the country, some students, including one of my informants, are willing to spend more than four hours a day commuting on public transportation to this location. At certain times of the day, especially when popular, big classes are starting or ending, the elevators of the buildings that house these English institutions are swarming with people trying to get in. Often, long lines of students are outside these elevators, all carrying square-shaped bags packed with English textbooks that promise them high scores on various English examinations.
Gangnam (which literally means the south of the river—the Han River of Seoul, in this case) is a location that carries high prestige in the minds of most Koreans, a part of Seoul known for expensive housing prices and high educational fervor of demanding, affluent parents. The fact that one is a student at one of these pricey English institutions, then, is a reason for boasting and a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991), which explains why students are willing to carry those bags, even if these bags are rather clashing with their stylish urban fashion. Whether it is carrying around this bag or reading an English self-help book in public spaces, the fact that one is studying English is not a reason to stand out noticeably or feel embarrassed for appearing ‘too nerdy.’ The fact that one is studying English signifies that one is a hardworking individual preparing for one’s future, not a college student wasting time and falling behind in the competition.

Even though South Koreans are exposed to English from a young age, English remains a difficult, uncomfortable foreign language and average Koreans only use Korean in their daily lives. However, English infiltrates everywhere in the lives of these college students, even outside these official places of English learning. In the coffee shops surrounding Exit 6 of Gangnam station (all with English names like Starbucks, Holly’s, or Tom n Toms), college students gather in small “study groups,” (pronounced seu-teo-di geu-rup) with the sole intention of studying English together. Advertisements in public spaces all over Seoul are covered with the faces of ‘star’ English instructors at various private English institutions, each promising them the best strategies to get a fast, high score on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) tests, both tests run by the American ETS (Educational Testing Service). Some ambitious college students, waiting for the subway
or on the bus, carry around small notebooks containing English vocabulary lists and grammar notes, as if each moment not spent preparing for the upcoming English test is a waste. Especially around the hip Gangnam station, young, foreign faces are easy to spot, as they are noticeably speaking English with other expatriates or local Korean friends. English surrounds students on the streets and in the popular media; not only are American companies now familiar household names in Korean families, many Korean firms are choosing to have English names. Names of products or companies are written directly in English, with the assumption that any modern Korean today can read them without any difficulty. A day without English is impossible in Korea today, even if very few Koreans will converse regularly in English.

English has become an indispensable part of the regular vocabulary of modern South Korean college students. Direct English loan words and ‘Konglish’ (blending Korean and English, or giving English words a local meaning, and pronounced kong-geul-li-swi) are common in daily conversations of college students. For example, “I have a ‘meeting’ at six with my professor,” says a college student, saying the word “meeting” in English, although in deliberate Korean accent (mi-ting). Words such as these are so embedded in the ‘Korean’ vocabulary that to say it in a ‘native’ American accent would appear pretentious and unnecessary. The word “meeting” is not only used as a loan word, but also has another distinct, local Konglish meaning. A popular social activity among Korean college students is a “meeting.” Part of the young dating scene of college students, a “meeting” is planned where a group of three to five male students meet with an equal number of female students for a “meeting”; the main purpose of this “meeting” is for these participants to make new friends, or possibly dating partners, in this casual setting.
that usually involves various ice-breaking or drinking games. So if a Korean college student told a friend “I have a ‘meeting’ tonight,” without any specification of whom s/he is meeting, it is assumed that it is not the “meeting” in the original sense of the English word. In an environment such as this, refusing to learn English or use English (even if it is Konglish) is unacceptable for daily survival. To not know the meaning of a commonly used English word in social conversations is to be potentially ridiculed and pitied as uneducated and unsophisticated.

The world of English for college students is vibrant not just in the physical world, but also in the on-line space. If ones types ‘English’ in Korea’s most popular portal site Naver.com, a long list of websites pop up. Sites run by private English institutions, online English learning sites where one can download digital files of English lectures, links to new English textbooks published… the list goes on. A huge task facing a Korean college student who has decided to improve his English test scores is navigating this long list, finding the ‘best’ option for himself. Online forums exist where Korean college students communicate about English. An online forum run by Hackers, one of the top private English institutions, is particularly active. In this Hetizen online community (a play on the words ‘Hackers,’ ‘citizen,’ and ‘netizen’), students write public English diaries, post up possible English test questions, participate in online English battles, share their English scores for comparison, and find possible English study group partners. The flood of postings and questions on this website is proof to the amount of attention and time spent on English education by the average college student in Korea.

Being a college student in Korea also means living with the negative sides of English education. The large investment of money and time to achieve that coveted 990 –
the perfect score – on the TOEIC test means that other things in one’s life have to
sacrificed for that goal and that the playing field is no longer level; not everyone can
afford the tuition at the prestigious English institutions by Gangnam station and
registration fees of expensive English tests. This clearly has enormous implications for
socioeconomic stratification, which will be discussed in later chapters. For the sole
purpose of learning English, well-off students or talented students who can get the
necessary scholarships leave for American universities, causing a sort of brain drain and a
general decrease in the quality of students in local universities, while others find short-
term opportunities to study abroad in English-speaking countries during the summer
(Philippines is a popular option, since it is much cheaper than either the United States,
Canada, or Australia). Students hear of news articles reporting on excessive parents
willing to cut the tongues of children to make them better pronounce English or the
breakdown of families from the ‘goose dad’ phenomenon, where fathers send the mothers
and children off to an English-speaking country, while the father remains in Korea alone
to provide for them. Being in this world, then, means being aware of the problems, but
also feeling helpless in how to change the downsides of this system.

Motivation for Research: Why Study Meanings of English in Seoul, South Korea

The thesis will answer the question why South Koreans today are such avid
English learners and what this avid learning of English means. Samsung Economic
Research Institute (SERI)’s report states that Koreans spend a substantial amount of time
and energy learning English (Jeon 2006). The report gives the following staggering
statistics as evidence for its claim. Between 2004 and 2005, 102,340 Koreans sat for
TOEFL; Koreans represented 18.5 percentage of the total 554,942 people taking the test
worldwide. Each Korean student spends an average of 15,548 hours learning English from middle school through college; and this is not including the growing portion of preschoolers taking English in kindergarten. Koreans spend a total of 14.3 trillion won annually for taking private English tutoring classes. In addition, they spend 700 billion won a year applying for tests evaluating their English proficiency. Together, these two expenses accounted for 1.9 percentage of Korea’s nominal GDP (806.6 trillion won) in 2005. (Japan, which has more than two and a half times Korea’s population, spends far less. According to estimates, Japanese people spend 5 trillion won – or 628.3 billion yen – annually on private English tutoring and English proficiency tests.)

What historical conditions and set of ideologies have brought about this English learning boom in South Korea? In answering this question, I plan on examining the place of English in the hyper-modernizing/globalizing (Cho 2000), ‘postcolonial’ (Ngugi 1997, Fanon 1967), neoliberal (Harvey 2007) space of contemporary South Korea and understanding how English education is a crucial site to observe the contradictory dynamics among the local, national, and global forces in South Korea. I attempt to do this through an ethnographic study of Korean college students’ experience of English in the local context of Seoul, South Korea, the cosmopolitan capital of South Korea. Seoul exemplifies the national obsession with English in a specific local site, but it is a local also quite distinct in its extreme English fervor and exceptionally global nature of the city. This makes Seoul a particularly appropriate site to examine the dynamics among local, national, and global and to contribute to the study of globalization as a local case study.

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1 One U.S. dollar amounts to approximately 1,080 won, on the day of this writing (4/24/2011).
What do I mean when I propose to do an *anthropological* study of globalization? Globalization is defined as an intensification of global interconnectedness through an explosion of traffic in “capital, people, commodities, images, and ideologies” (Inda and Rosaldo 2008: 4). Inda and Rosaldo argue that the tendency of much of the literature on globalization has been to focus on the macro scope of the phenomenon, conceptualizing globalization in terms of very large-scale economic, political, or cultural processes:

Anthropology, on the other hand, is most concerned with the articulation of the global and the local, that is, with how globalizing processes exist in the context of, and must come to terms with, the realities of particular societies, with their accumulated – that is to say, historical – cultures and way of life (2008: 7). Anthropology’s focus on the local experience of the global, “a concrete attentiveness to human agency, to the practices of everyday life, in short, to how subjects mediate the processes of globalization” has been a powerful motivation in how I approached this study of English, a global language (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:7). This thesis contributes to the larger study of globalization by providing an ethnographic case study of how a specific local context experiences the global, specifically how the global language of English is experienced by Korean college students in Seoul, South Korea. English learning is occurring all over the globe, as a result of American-led globalization (Crystal 1997); however, how local subjects respond to this process is local and cultural specific. The particular South Korean response to the global rise of English is the crux of my investigation.

A particularly useful analytical term introduced by Inda and Rosaldo (2008) that has shaped this thesis’s approach to the study of global English is “de/territorialization.” In cultural anthropological studies pre-dating globalization, culture has been seen as
“something rooted in ‘soil,’” as a bounded entity that occupies a specific physical territory (Inda and Rosaldo 2008: 13). However, it is evident that globalization has now pulled culture apart from place, as globalization is “a process that brings cultures formerly located in different parts of the world into the same physical terrains, thus turning numerous places into spaces of cultural juxtaposition and mixture” (2008: 13). However, Inda and Rosaldo argue that anthropologists also realize that the uprooting of culture is only half of the story of globalization. The other half of the story is that “for anthropologists, cultural flows do not just float ethereally across the globe but are always reinscribed (however partially or fleetingly) in specific cultural environments” (Inda and Rosaldo 2008: 14). Along with deterritorialization of culture from globalizing forces, anthropologists have come to also conceptualize culture as reterritorialized. Inda and Rosaldo argue that these processes occur simultaneously, capturing this double movement with the neologism “de/territorialization.”

I argue that English learning in South Korea is a prime example of “de/territorialization,” in which Seoul as a metropolitan, cosmopolitan city is infused with globalizing forces but at the same time firmly rooted in a specific local space with its own set of cultural and historical baggage. The fixed physical space of the Gangnam Subway Station in Seoul, South Korea – which is lively with popular English institutions and individuals gathering all over to learn and practice English – makes it a specific local, cultural environment. However, the flexible mobility of people and ideas moving through this area makes this space a highly globalized and deterritorialized space at the same time.

Our common, popular conception of globalization is captured in images of the glitzy financial capitals of the world and well-known international organizations. How
does English learning in Seoul, South Korea fit into this picture of globalization? Saskia Sassen argues that studying globalization must move beyond understandings that focus only on “self-evidently global institutions” – such as the global financial markets or institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organization (WTO) – and that we must detect “the presence of globalizing dynamics in thick social environments that mix national and non-national elements” (2007: 5). She argues that although some processes are localized in national or subnational settings, they are part of globalization “in that they involve transboundary networks and entities connecting multiple local or national processes and actors” (2007: 6). In sum, she argues that studying the global “entails a focus not only on that which is explicitly global in scale but also on locally scaled practices and conditions that are articulated with global dynamics” (2007: 18). Sassen’s work allows us to understand why English learning in Seoul, South Korea can be a prime example of how globalizing dynamics are present in local settings and how local actors and processes are embedded in global institutions, processes, and imaginaries. My informants of this study, whether or not they are consciously aware, are local agents connected to the global in powerful ways and actively negotiating the meanings of that encounter in both important and mundane ways.

In Seoul, English education is marketed by mainly the government and the private English industry as the necessary path to become competitive, on the individual level in the local context and on a national level in the global stage. Because of this marketing, English education is accepted by most in South Korea to be crucial to become a modern, upward-mobile subject and English proficiency has come to signify modernity, class status, and cosmopolitanism (Lee 2004, 2006, Park and Abelmann 2004). However, the
English boom is resulting in various social problems increasingly noticed by the media and local experts, such as the rising costs of private English education that worsens the already unequal education field and the splitting up of stable families who are ‘forced’ to send children abroad for English acquisition. Why, then, despite all these problems are Koreans still spending so much money and time on English? What does learning English really mean to my informants? My thesis will explore such questions.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter Two “Meanings of English in Contemporary South Korea” begins with a brief history of the English language in South Korea, focusing on how English was first brought into the Korean peninsula in the late nineteenth century and how it has evolved in meaning over time. Then, I will show how the English language is an integral part of the modern identity of South Koreans today. Next, I enter into the first part of my ethnographic materials. My first source of ethnographic materials is popular media, which is rife with representations of English and a significant source of interactions with English for average South Koreans. This will involve a critical analysis of such representations of English in popular culture, showing how popular media is simultaneously a site for reflection about the largely unquestioned status of English in South Korea and also a powerful force reinforcing the status quo.

Chapter Three “English Learning in South Korea: Where Pragmatism and Fantasy Meet” demonstrates that English in Korea today experienced by college students is both a down-to-earth pragmatic survival skill and also a set of fantasies about what English can do for their identities and future prospects. English plays such a powerful role in Korean
society because it plays to both the pragmatic and fetishistic desires of average Koreans. This chapter will also explore how English is interlinked with issues of socioeconomic class, cultural and social capital, commodification of education, and ideology, in order to demonstrate how complex and multifaceted the English boom is, as it is embedded in a rich historical and cultural local context.

Chapter Four “National Identity in a World of Globalization: The Fantasy of Becoming a Global Citizen at Home” will look at how English learning is a site of potential conflict between nationalism and globalization, particularly looking at how English education has been promoted and influenced by Korea’s globalization discourse. The main focus will be whether my informants saw their English learning as a conflict between globalization and nationalism. How my informants responded to the debate about making English a second official language in Korea will be a productive site to look at this. How English is intertwined with cosmopolitan fantasies and the desire for Koreans to be global – but in the comforts of ‘home’ – will be explored.

Chapter Five “English and Power in the ‘Post-colonial’ space of South Korea: Anxieties of a ‘Small’ Nation” will look at how my informants experience English today in a certain historical context, particularly informed by South Korea’s history of ‘colonialism’ and its current ‘neo-colonial’ status (the ‘colonial’ history of Korea vis-à-vis China in the pre-modern period, Japan during the early half of the twentieth century, and the United States today). I will start by looking at scholarly discussions about how English can be seen as a tool of linguistic and cultural imperialism, and how this has been the case specifically in South Korea (Phillipson 1992, Pennycook 1995). I will explore how my informants experienced English in a specific context of seeing Korea vis-à-vis
other nations, such as the United States, Japan, and China. How English is a site where anxieties about South Korea being a vulnerable, threatened nation-state reveal themselves and how these anxieties inform informants’ experience with English will also be explored. Using different linguistic globalization paradigms and readings of ‘postcolonial’ globalization (Sonntag 2008, Gikandi 2001), I will try to understand the English boom in a nuanced way, paying attention to both the global structural inequalities and the human agency of the locals.

Chapter Six “Conclusion” will explain how my thesis has answered the core question (why are Korean college students today such avid learners of English) and through a summary of earlier chapters I will demonstrate how my ethnography has shown my informants’ complex, ambivalent attitudes toward English.

Methodology: Description of Ethnographic Research and Engagement with Past Research

I used my language abilities in Korean to locate and interview informants during my three weeks of field work in Seoul, South Korea during the month of August in 2010. Through both personal contacts and serendipity, I was able to locate college-aged students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in Seoul today for in-depth interviews about their experiences concerning English education and the place English has in Korean society. Aside from such semi-formal interviews, I was also able to gain student insights on English from passing conversations in many, naturally-occurring instances and also from simply observing the streets and buildings surrounding the Gangnam Subway Station. During my time in Seoul, I was quickly able to see that my field site was
not limited just to official spaces of English learning, such as hakwons, but that it was the whole city in general infiltrated with the presence of English everywhere. From this realization, I was motivated to pay close attention to the various forces shaping my informants’ experience of English, from the role of the street advertisements by private English institutions to the popular media that my informants are exposed to constantly.

A close participant-observation of the local space of this study – the surrounding areas of Gangnam Subway Station in Seoul – allowed me to detect the globalizing dynamics embedded in the local context. I focused closely on how the local agents in this space expressed and experienced English, the language of globalization. Except for the formal, audio-recorded interview with a university professor (discussed in Chapter Five), all my college-aged informants revealed most of their telling stories and comments in ‘deep hanging out’ sessions, while we were eating ice cream, hanging out at coffee shops, or working out together. ‘Deep hanging out’ is a methodology espoused by anthropologists who want to see their informants speak and react in their natural elements, and I also found this to be the most successful strategy in my own research. Even when I had semi-formal interviews with some of my informants, I let them direct the conversation based on their personal interests and concerns, instead of making them answer a set of prepared questions.

An important acknowledgement to make is the positionality of the ethnographer in this study. As a 1.5-generation Korean-American\(^2\) who has done schooling in both

\(^2\) A 1.5 Korean-American generation refers to individuals who were born in Korea, but grew up from an early age in the United States. They are a distinct group from the first generation – their parents who were born in Korea and spent most of their adult years there as well – and the second generation, who was born and raised in the U.S. This group generally has the most hybrid, ambivalent identity, identifying relatively equally with both Korea and the U.S.
countries and is fluent in both English and Korean, I am acutely aware that such a background has shaped my in-between, ambivalent position between Korea and the United States, both countries that play a role in the English boom of Seoul, South Korea. My informants saw me in different lights based on how they perceived my mixed background, either identifying me more as Korean or as an American. Because of my mixed loyalties to both ‘homes,’ I had to play a fine balancing act to fairly account for the power dynamics between the Korea and the United States intimately involved in the state of English in my field site.

I was personally motivated to study this topic because I felt angered and disturbed by my perception that Koreans were becoming ‘slaves’ to the English language. I was also uncomfortable of the privileged status I was given by Koreans because of my fluency in English and American background. As a naturalized American citizen, I was self-conscious of America’s imperialistic presence all over the world, particularly in South Korea where it commands enormous power politically, militarily, economically, culturally, and also linguistically. Both my patriotic and nationalistic sentiments towards Korea and United States shaped my interest in this study; I began with the somewhat naïve optimism that both Koreans and Americans reading this thesis would become more informed about what exactly the global spread of English means to each party and that this growing awareness would help each party critically reflect on what it really means to be living in a globalizing world. I felt that even if one is not an American English teacher employed in Korea benefiting from the English boom, Americans should generally be more aware of the status of their mother tongue abroad and what that implies. What does it mean to be a native speaker of a language that is the most powerful and prestigious one
in the world? Why do we as Americans take for granted our extremely privileged ‘monolingual’ status? Why do Americans travelling abroad ‘obnoxiously’ ask locals directions in English, as if it is natural they the locals should be able to speak English? These are some of the burning questions that motivated my personal stake in this thesis.

I will be answering the thesis question largely relying on the ethnographic material I have obtained not only from the physical field site of Seoul, but also from the more intangible field site of South Korean popular media (see Chapter Two for an analysis of how English is represented in contemporary Korean popular media). I also engage with existing scholarly literature that helped my historical and theoretical analysis of the question at hand. The texts I engaged with for this thesis can be largely divided into three categories. First is my engagement with classic theoretical texts of ideology, commodity, capital, and nation. How the English boom is a result of a set of ideologies actively promoted by certain local and global agents (Althusser 1971), how English learning has evolved into a form of fetishized commodity (Marx 1867), and how English education has become a form of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) are discussed in Chapter Three, to analyze and understand what my informants have told me about their feelings and experiences with English. How Koreans, along with most individuals all over the world, are indoctrinated with the ‘illusion’ of a sacred, unique nation from a young age and how this shapes their attitude towards the heavy presence of English in South Korea is discussed in detail in Chapter Four (Anderson 1991, Balibar 1991).

The second set of texts this thesis engaged with concerns the concept of globalization. In this chapter, to make sense of how an ethnographic study of globalization is possible and argue why it is a necessary direction of research in the larger
study of globalization, I drew on Inda and Rosaldo (2008) and Sassen (2007). Kim (2000) and Shin’s work (2003) were particularly useful for this thesis in providing the historical background for Korea’s intense encounter with globalization in the last few decades and also in suggesting a theoretical framework for understanding the seeming ‘paradox’ between hyper-globalization and zealous ethno-nationalism co-existing in South Korea today. Also, analytical categories such as ‘work of imagination’ (Appadurai 1996) and ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong 1999) were critical in making sense of how informants negotiated their national identity vis-à-vis the forces of globalization (see Chapter Four for my engagement with Kim 2000, Shin 2003, Appadurai 1996, and Ong 1999).

In globalization studies, the implications of the global spread of English have concerned scholars particularly from linguistics (Pennycook 1995, Phillipson 1992, Crystal 1997, Kachru 1986). Scholars have widely different opinions (ranging from celebratory to condemnatory) on what the global spread of English means for non-English-speaking countries such as South Korea, and these viewpoints will be discussed in Chapter Five, to explore different ways of understanding the implications of the English learning boom in South Korea.

South Koreans’ avid learning of English is unmistakably the result of Korea’s globalization. However, globalization can function differently in ‘post-colonial’ spaces like South Korea. How does South Korea’s legacy of being a battleground for the United States’ Cold War (and the continuing dependence on the United States militarily, economically, and geopolitically) impact how Koreans learn English, a language almost synonymous with America itself in the minds of South Koreans (Chen 2010, Yoshimi 2003)? How can our understanding of Korea’s linguistic globalization become fuller
using different paradigms, such as linguistic imperialism, linguistic hegemony, and linguistic cosmopolitanism, and accounting for the fact that Korea is a ‘post-colonial,’ non-Western country in the so-called periphery (Sonntag 2008, Gikandi 2001)? How can attitudes ‘post-colonial’ subjects have towards their former/current ‘masters’ (Fanon 1967), particularly the complex feelings of inferiority and insecurity, be important in how I make sense of some of my informants’ explanations about why they (and Korea as a whole) need to learn English? (See Chapter Five for my engagement with Yoshimi 2003, Chen 2010, Sonntag 2008, Gikandi 2001, Fanon 1967).

The final third set of texts engaged with in this thesis are specifically related to previous studies of English in South Korea, but also relevant are research on South Korea that provides some insight into the current English learning boom. In order to place the current English learning boom in historical perspective (see Chapter Two), I referred to scholarly work that researched how English has first entered the Korean peninsula in the late nineteenth century and how the meanings of English have evolved over time with Korea’s history (Collins 2005). In my exploration of how English configures into the modern Korean identity (see Chapter Two), I looked at research that closely examined the usage and experience of English. Lee (2004, 2006) studied contemporary Korean popular media, such as television advertisement and pop music, to examine what the role of English is in how Koreans imagine their modern identities. Park and Abelmann (2004) looked at how the ability to manage children’s English education has become an integral part of what it means to be a modern Korean parent, because this ability embodies a modern Korean parent’s ambitions to have class distinction and become cosmopolitan. I used English as a productive site to look at how nationalism and globalization can
potentially be in conflict in South Korea; the resolution I find between these potentially conflicting forces confirm Lee and Park and Abelmann’s research; each use their respective topic of focus to explore this complex dynamics between nationalism and post-national globalism (for fuller discussion, see Chapter Four).

Several existing scholarly work on the English learning boom of South Korea has focused on the role of ideology (Park 2009, Song 2011, Prey 2005). Relying on Althusser’s classic definition, I also attempted to understand my informants’ relationship to English using this lens of ideology (see Chapter Three). Furthermore, the need to place the English learning boom into a larger picture of South Korea encouraged an engagement with research that discusses larger aspects of South Korea. Sorenson (1994) discusses how important educational achievements is in the Confucian-influenced country of South Korea and this led to an understanding of how the English learning boom in South Korea is partially the result of the larger national obsession with education in general (see Chapter Two for fuller discussion). A RAND report (2004) describes the ups and downs of South Korea’s attitudes towards the United States since the end of the Second World War, focusing on the sharp negative turn in attitudes towards the United States that took place around the year 2002 involving incidents with the U.S. military stationed in South Korea. Although this thesis does not delve into a comprehensive history of South Korea-U.S. relations, a topic relevant but much beyond the scope of this thesis, it does use the RAND report to indicate that the spread of English in South Korea today is fundamentally intertwined with Korea’s ally status with the U.S. militarily, economically, and politically (see Chapter Five for fuller discussion). Finally, I also engage with untranslated Korean books written by local intellectuals on the topic of
English in Chapter Five to appreciate the degree of critical self-reflection local agents have about the ‘imposition’ and ‘infiltration’ of English in contemporary Korean society (Cho 2001, Shi and Jung 2003, Yoon 2007)

This thesis on South Korea will work as an anthropological case study in Korean education, global English studies, globalization, localization, American imperialism, and postcolonial studies. The situation in South Korea can have useful comparisons to other countries that share similar histories and paths of modern development. However, this thesis will limit itself to a description and analysis of the situation in South Korea to prevent covering too much material with little depth. Because my fieldwork was in Seoul, the metropolitan capital of South Korea, and limited to studying Korean college students, this thesis cannot claim to represent the entire population of South Koreans. However, I feel that an investigation of how Korean college students, the future leaders of the country and the first generation to grow up with no direct ties to Korea’s colonial history, see English as a necessary part of their lives is crucial in gaining an understanding of the fast-evolving, modern Korean society.

On a final note, I would like to note several qualifications about the terms prevalently used in this thesis. I use the word ‘English’ in this thesis to interchangeably and broadly mean 1) the English language itself, 2) English learning and education, both formally and informally, 3) the usage of English, including English-Korean mixing (Konglish). Also, I use Korea or Korean to refer to South Korea or South Korean. Lastly, I place ‘post-colonial’ in quotations to highlight the fact that although South Korea is technically an independent nation-state with sovereign rule, the term ‘post-colonial’ is
still problematic since legacies of past colonialism and ongoing imperialistic presences are still existing in Korean society (for fuller discussion, see Chapter Five).
**Chapter Two: Meanings of English in Contemporary South Korea**

This chapter begins by tracing in broad strokes the history of English in Korea from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary moment in order to place the contemporary moment in a larger historical picture. English has become what it is today by becoming part of the Korean nation-state’s official language policy. I will then demonstrate how the English language functions as an integral part of the modern identity of South Koreans today. Finally, I will jump into my first major source of ethnographic materials: the popular media of contemporary South Korea. The popular media is rife with representations of English and a significant source of interactions with English for average South Koreans. This will involve a critical analysis of such representations of English in popular culture, demonstrating how popular media is both a site for critical self-reflection about the state of English in South Korea and also a powerful force reinforcing the status quo.

_English Enters Korea: Overview of English’s History in Korea_

How did the English language become such an important part of the modern Korean experience? It is important to note that Korea’s encounter with English has a certain history that has led to a specific Korean response to it. By tracing this history, one can see that Korea’s attitude towards English (and all it represented) gradually moved from its original isolationist stance of the late nineteenth century up to the highly receptive stance of today. Tracing this history will be an useful exercise in order to understand how the meanings of English in South Korea today is not given and
ahistorical, existing in vacuum, but constructed over time and influenced by various agents throughout history.

In the late nineteenth century, Korea was wary at the time of its first encounter with the English language. Koreans already had their own language with a long history; the Korean language is estimated to be at least five thousand years old (Poonoosamy 2009). As an isolationist East Asian country, it was last in initiating contact with the West and was able to witness the negative impact of Western colonialism on its neighbors, Japan and China (Collins 2005). In the minds of Koreans, the learning of the English language was directly associated with the negative impacts of Western colonialism and was resisted actively. There are records of the imperial court at the time persecuting those with Western learning, a clear indication that Korea was initially unreceptive of English and the West, resisting the influence with nationalism and isolationism. By 1882, the tide changed when Korea signed a treaty with the United States, fostering the arrival of missionaries, advisors, traders, and teachers who brought the English language with them (Collins 2005: 419-20).

Later, in the face of Japanese expansion into the Korean peninsula, English became a tool for resistance among some Korean intellectuals hoping to further associate themselves with the Americans. To Koreans at the time, English thus was not politically neutral, but a language considered synonymous to the West and the West’s geopolitical influence. During the period of official Japanese rule in Korea, starting with the annexation in 1910, English was taught as a mandatory subject, with the Japanese publishing annual reports in English on the ways they improved the Korean life (Collins 2005: 420). At this time, English was then both a means of disseminating pro-Japanese
propaganda and a site of resistance to Japanese imperialism. It is significant to note how both sides attempted to appropriate the perceived powerfulness of the English language to achieve their own goals. From the beginning, then, English in Korea was a language that was deemed powerful.

Following liberation from the Japanese Empire (1945), South Korea had a formal national language policy, with Korean politically acclaimed as the national writing system used in government documents, literature and textbooks. Since 1945, every October 9th is formally celebrated as the Alphabet Day in Korea and its inventor, King Sejong of the Chosun Dynasty – the last dynasty of Korea – is honored on that day (Poonoosamy 2009). In this tumultuous era in Korean history, the United States had a military government in Southern Korea from 1945 and 1948, while the Soviet Union was in control of the northern half of Korea. These two superpowers continued to play a dominant role in the Korean peninsula, particularly during the Korean War and afterwards, ultimately affecting Korea’s division into two countries. The longstanding U.S.-South Korea alliance that continues even till today was established during the early years of the Cold War as a bulwark against the communist expansion in Asia. For instance, in 1954, the United States and South Korea signed the Mutual Security Agreement, in which they promised to defend each other in the event of outside aggression, and South Korea was ruled largely by U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes until the 1990s (Cummings 1997).

During these decades, English use became more prominent and practical because of international trade, particularly with the United States. Collins notes that English was also largely used to communicate with the U.S. military personnel, since the U.S. military
government needed those with the English language skills to act as intermediaries (2005: 421). Thus, the practicality of knowing English made learning English an opportunistic endeavor and made English associated with prestige. In the 1960s, South Korean teachers were starting to get trained to teach English and in the later decades, English was becoming associated with positive middle class and cosmopolitan values (Collins 2005: 423).

Another critical juncture was the 1988 Seoul Olympics, when the South Korean government actively encouraged its citizens to learn English to better host their guests during the event; English was now associated with globalization, both cultural and economic, and the government began promoting English language education to cultivate Korea’s international competitiveness (Collins 2005). The Kim Young-sam administration in the 1990s fostered this effort by initiating a globalization project called segyehwa and further promoting English instruction in the public schools. English education used to be offered from middle school (seventh grade) until in 1997, when the new national English language policy started introducing English at the beginning of third grade (Ministry of Education 2007).

In South Korea today, English has evolved into a crucial means to gain social prestige and economic success, with English ability an important part of entrance examinations to universities and qualifications for top companies. English education is now considered essential to being a modern, cosmopolitan, upward-mobile subject in today’s South Korea. English proficiency is considered a good indicator for an individual’s education level and class status. The Korean language itself is becoming more ‘Englishized’ with an increasing number of English loan words and the dynamic,
creative development of ‘Konglish’ (such as the discussion of the word “meeting” in Chapter One).

Upon inauguration in 2008, current President Lee Myung-bak has made known his intention to restructure the nationwide system of English education. As a presidential nominee he pledged to reinforce public education in such a way that all high school graduates can communicate with foreigners without difficulty, and his presidential transition team suggested that all the English classes in high schools be taught in English. Although these initiatives have not been achieved and have been looked at as unrealistic political publicity stunts, these kinds of proposals represent a historical turn from a Korea that used to stress the importance of learning Chinese characters, showing the shift from Korea’s belonging to a Sinocentric regional order to an American global order. This emphasis on English also shows Korea’s turn from its historical isolationism to modern-day globalism, with a high emphasis on the force of global capitalism, both economically and culturally.

Practicality aside, English has been closely associated with (Western) progressive or liberal ideas throughout Korea’s history, particularly among the younger generations. Despite the high level of nation-wide enthusiasm for English education, there are actually very few, if any, interaction opportunities with English-speaking foreigners for average Koreans. Furthermore, even in the face of the rise of the importance of English as the most important foreign language to learn in South Korea, the mother tongue Korean still is the language that ties Koreans together. Even though academics recognize that the notion of national monolingualism is a myth and an ideological construct, average

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3 Korea Times, 4/2/2008 “History of English Education in Korea”
Koreans adhere to the ‘one nation, one language’ model of conceptualizing their nation and Koreans consider themselves one of the most linguistically and ethnically homogeneous nations in the world (Park 2009, Balibar 1991, Anderson 1991). The Seoul dialect is considered the most prestigious standard variety of Korean, taught in schools and used in the media, even though informal regional dialects are used heavily in areas outside of Seoul.

**English as an Integral Part of the Korean Modern Identity**

After more than a century of first entering the Korean peninsula, the English language is now a significant part of the modern Korean identity. One can clearly see this by looking at the English-infiltrated media and education that surrounds all generations of Koreans today. Although whole conversations are not carried out in English, official English test scores or ability to understand and use commonly used English phrases and words in conversations is an important part of the modern Korean identity. For instance, Jamie Shinhee Lee’s research “Linguistic Hybridization in K-pop: Discourse of Self-assertion and Resistance” (2004) and “Linguistic Construction of Modernity: English Mixing in Korean Television Commercials” (2006) look at the construction of linguistic modernity via English mixing in the discourse of Korean popular music and Korean television commercials. By looking closely at the television advertisements that she recorded, Lee (2006) argues that mixing English with Korean is a linguistic mechanism for the construction of modernity in contemporary South Korea. Knowledge and use of English in South Korea is a defining linguistic expression of modernity and the absence of English is linguistically disassociated from modernity, she concludes.
After examining over seven hundred advertising spots, she says that commercials that use English purposefully portray and target a more modern, younger Korean subject. For instance, within the same domain, say technology, “KO [Korean-only] cellular phone commercials are associated with an old lady in the countryside who is not ‘up to speed’ with advanced modern technology, while EM [English-mixing] cellular phone advertisements portray teenagers or young adults with unconventional mindsets” (2006: 87). Lee’s (2004) research on K-pop, or Korean popular music, shows that English has been used by young popular musicians to express resistance to traditional norms, for example to express sexual desire or anti-establishment spirit. English-mixing enables young Korean musicians to exercise artistic freedom without being offensive to the conservative censorship board or older-generation audiences whose verbal repertoire is unlikely to contain much English. In the media then, English-mixing indicates younger generations’ modern identities, whereas the absence of English use in the form of exclusive Korean and/or Sino-Korean signifies older generations’ traditional identities.

Through her research, Lee argues that:

…being a Korean-English bilingual is arguably the most determining identity required for one to claim membership in modernity. Being an English-knowing and English-using Korean is one of the most significant characteristics of ‘being modern’ in contemporary South Korea (2006: 63).

Surrounded by English in music and advertising, a modern Korean would need to acquire the necessary level of English ability to survive in such an environment. To claim to be a modern Korean, then, English can no longer be an alien language, but part of one’s active daily verbal repertoire. Lee’s research demonstrates how a language can be intimately tied to identity formation; English usage and mixing is closely linked to the realities and/or fantasies about what a modern Korean identity is. Many of my informants mixed
English words with Korean speech in their interviews, as in the television commercials or K-pop songs examined by Lee. Why English mixing today is seen as a sign of modernity, sophistication and cosmopolitanism, as opposed to mixing Japanese or French, for example, is a result of Korea’s history with English and English-speaking countries, namely the United States, which has placed English in the highest privileged position among all foreign languages in the minds of South Koreans.

In Korea, there is a common belief that beginning learning English as early as possible will give one the competitive edge in mastering English. Because of this widespread myth, modern Korean parenthood involves the ability to manage children’s English education strategically. 1990s in South Korea, along with many other countries around the world influenced by similar ideologies, was a decade of neo-liberal education reform, so that in the twenty-first century, free market principles and the consumer demand for private education won over ‘egalitarian’ state regulations. This resulted in Korea having one of the most vibrant and expensive private after-school educational markets in the world. An anthropological study on mothers’ management of English education in South Korea shows that this effort by parents to manage their children’s English education is part of the modern parent’s larger cosmopolitan and class mobility ambitions (Park and Abelmann 2004).

Park and Abelmann argue that English works as an index of South Korea’s and South Koreans’ “cosmopolitan striving in the global order.” The authors argue that what it means to be South Korean is transforming: “increasingly, to be South Korean means to be South Korean ‘in the world’ – a prospect that calls for the mastery of English as an index of cosmopolitan striving” (2004: 650). They assert, however, that the values of
English diverge across the class spectrum. The work examines the life of English through the narratives of three mothers with distinct class positions on their management of their children’s after-school English education. They examine the ways in which mothers’ management of this after-school English education speaks to their own class mobility (or maintenance) ambitions. The research overall argues that English works simultaneously as both a local and global sign, by speaking to both local desires to have social distinction and global desires to be cosmopolitan.

Thus, English ability, on top of its obvious practical value in the education and employment market, also works symbolically in the minds of South Koreans by addressing elusive desires and fantasies of individuals, namely mothers who hope for their offspring’s future success. Because the English after-school market for children “offers a highly stratified and diversified menu in terms of both format and price,” the mother’s management of this English after-school education speaks to their modern parent identity (Park and Abelmann 2004:646). By successfully managing their children’s English education, this can enable both tangible and intangible benefits for the mothers’ families, from the family’s real social mobility in Korean society to the satisfaction of desires to be ‘cosmopolitan.’ Park and Abelmann’s research demonstrates how families in South Korea can no longer easily claim to belong to Korea’s modernity without confronting the issue of English learning, a now impossible-to-ignore part of Korean life.

A notable educational feature of South Korea is the fact that the most elite high schools in the country – such as Daewon or Hanyoung Foreign Language High Schools in Seoul – are foreign language high schools, based on competitive entrance
examinations that stress high English test scores. The Korean education system is structured so that the quality of the high school the student attends determines his or her likelihood of acceptance to top Seoul-based universities. Also, the importance of English proficiency extends to later stages of a South Korean’s life, with college students still laboring over English to gain competitive acceptances to top companies. Even after acceptance to companies, the struggle with English does not end: eight out of 10 salaried workers think they are underpaid because of their poor English skills.\(^4\) In the same survey, some 79.1 percent of respondents said they perceived English as an obstacle to their career. Asked about when it posed an obstacle, 53.8 percent said when their English skills limited their job selection or transfer opportunities, followed by when they felt insecure and timid because of their English language abilities (47.6 percent); when they were unable to say something in English when they needed to at work (45.5 percent); when they saw friends starting careers at large companies (33.6 percent); when they saw co-workers taking charge of important duties only because of their superior English (23.0 percent); and when they were not promoted because of their English skills (18.9 percent). This shows that a South Korean faces constant stress about mastering English throughout their lifetime, truly making English an impossible-to-ignore part of being a South Korean today.

**English in Korean Popular Media: Site for Discourse Analysis**

An important site to examine in order to understand how English is experienced by South Koreans today is an analysis of how English is represented in the popular media. Representations of English in the popular media – such as radio, television, film, popular

\(^4\) *Chosun Ilbo*, 10/8/2009 “Poor English Seen as Obstacle to Higher Salaries”
websites, and newspapers – vary widely and focus on different aspects of English education, but collectively they are some of the most powerful sites that shape how Koreans perceive and experience English on a daily basis. It is important to note that underneath the seeming receptiveness and eagerness towards English education on the surface level, there is also a negative reaction to the growth of English’s importance in Korea, which surfaces all over popular media. Such public critique of the excessive English boom can be a double-edged sword that not only raises public awareness, but also reinforces the notion that English is indeed important in Korean society and cannot be ignored.

Excessive Educational Fervor and Desires to Succeed in the Hypercompetitive Context

Television dramas (referred to as deu-ra-ma by Koreans) are extremely popular in South Korea and are aired during primetime hours daily. A drama that aired in 2007 titled “Catching Up to Gangnam Mothers” gained a wide following for candidly portraying the high – often extreme – education fervor of South Korea. In the drama, a single mother with a smart, studious middle school son living in Gangbuk (the north of the Han River) of Seoul discovers how ‘behind’ her son is when he takes a city-wide English exam, competing against Gangnam students. She is surprised because her son has always been the top of his class, without ever relying on private institutions. To her dismay, she realizes that for her son to be accepted to a top university in Seoul, he will have to be as good as the Gangnam children who all attend expensive after-school English programs and receive private tutoring in math, science, or writing as well. The drama narrates this mother’s move to Gangnam for her son’s education, which turns out to be an enormous
financial burden on her, since housing prices and private education bills are extremely costly in Gangnam. This desperate effort of a Gangbuk mother and son to ‘catch up’ to their Gangnam counterparts is largely portrayed humorously and sympathetically, but the drama is scattered with social critique about the excessive educational fervor of Korean mothers. For instance, the drama clearly portrays how uneven the educational playing field is based on socioeconomic status; the single mom finds paying for her son’s private English education bills back-breaking. One of the main characters of the drama, a teacher teaching Korean Literature in the Gangnam middle school, laments that students no longer take his class and subject seriously, spending much more time on studying English vocabulary and grammar rules.

The climax of the drama is when one of the sons of the more zealous Gangnam mothers commits suicide when he is unable to withstand the stress and pressure; he actually wanted to be a painter, but his domineering mother forces him to attend a highly competitive science high school where he feels like the dumbest one there. Although this drama did not stop the excessive educational fervor of Korea, especially towards English, this drama very likely may have raised public awareness about what is at stake when less wealthy families or students not interested in English or top universities are all forced into a situation where money and English matters tremendously to ‘succeed.’

In a society that historically values education highly – with a tradition of public service examinations and Confucian scholars – gaining acceptance to top universities (where high English test scores is one of the qualifying factors) is often the only ticket to success and climbing the social ladder (Sorenson 1994). The obsession with English is partially a result of Korea’s globalization and internalization of Western ideologies that
privilege English over other ‘periphery’ languages, but it can also be a result of Korea’s historical and modern obsession with education in general. All my informants made the connection between successful English education and personal success in their conversations. English for Korean college students is not only a matter of appearing modern and cosmopolitan, but a material, tangible way to gain the educational qualifications (e.g. TOEFL scores) to gain success in the local context that stresses education as the most important ticket to success. Looked at in this way, English may be simply another example of a larger, national problem with over-the-top, competitive education in general in South Korea.

On top of this historical legacy of valuing education is the anxiety that Korea needs to catch up to the rest of the world, and that individuals in Korea must also run fast to not fall back in the local, competitive context. In order to ‘catch up’ with the rest of the world in the aftermath of the disastrous Korean War, South Korea has gone through hyper-compressed modernization and globalization (Cho 2000). The path of English education in South Korea has become ‘Koreanized’ in the specific cultural and historical contexts of post-war South Korea that can be characterized by anxiety and competition, resulting in densely-populated, highly urbanized contemporary South Korea where opportunities to be part of the social elite are scarce even though everyone desires them. English is deeply embedded in this local context; the same anxious and competitive spirit that mires education as a whole in Korea also affects how English is experienced by Koreans.
English as an Impossible Language and Feelings of Inadequacy

Another popular media that young Koreans are exposed to is the Internet. The portal site Naver.com is one of the most frequently visited site where Koreans read their news, follow blogs, or have public discussions. A popular feature of Naver.com is the *webtoon* (blending of the English words ‘web’ and ‘cartoons’) it publishes for free for its visitors. The issue of English often appears in these popular *webtoons*. For instance, cartoonist Jo Suk’s popular humor series “Maeum ui sori” (roughly translated to “The Sounds of My Heart”) had an entertaining parody of a typical encounter with an English-speaking foreigner in Korea. The cartoon titled “English Man” (6/8/2010) narrates a situation of a typical restaurant in Korea, when a blonde-haired, blue-eyed foreigner walks in. Below is an excerpt from the comic: in the first scene, the patrons in the store are all smiling and engaged in lively conversation. Jo writes “in a peaceful store, a foreigner walks in to ask for directions, asking ‘excuse me’....” In the next scene, he writes “the store fell into sadness,” comically describing how all the patrons stopped laughing and talking, in fear that the foreigner will choose them to ask for directions. One patron right in front of the entrance even runs away in sight of the foreigner. Although this is an exaggerated comical depiction of a typical encounter with an English-speaking foreigner in Korea, this captures the uneasiness and discomfort Koreans feel when forced to speak English, although they grew up learning English from a relatively young age. Such representations of English in the popular media reinforce the idea that English is a difficult, alien language that ‘Others’ speak and that ‘we’ are poor English speakers who should avoid any embarrassing encounters with foreigners.
Over 6,000 netizens left comments on this webtoon, mostly laughing in agreement with the cartoon and engaging in conversation with another about the day’s webtoon. Few netizens wrote how funny but sad this situation was. One netizen (ienl****) stood out for his politically charged comment: “I can acutely feel the power of the Yankees” (1/11/2011). It is important to note that most netizens simply left comments stating how funny today’s cartoon was and that the more politically expressive netizens were rare. The fact that the majority of netizens simply laughed off this cartoon shows how prevalent such situations and reactions are in everyday South Korean life and that most Koreans accept that it is the way it is.
Nationalistic Reactions from Public Figures

One source of popular, public response towards the growing influence of English in South Korea has basis on nationalist sentiments. In 2008, widely known Korean rock singer Shin Hae-chul added his two cents during his Internet radio show, “Ghost Station” on Present Lee Myung-bak’s new English promises. He said sarcastically that Korea should just add itself as the 51st state of the United States or become part of the Commonwealth of Nations. “First the Defense Minister and the president should conduct their cabinet meeting in English, then the National Assembly should conduct their sessions and votes in English,” Shin said.

Another example of such a public figure critiquing the English boom in Korea occurred in 2010, when the Korean singer Horan from the experimental musical group Clazziquai openly criticized mothers for putting their children’s tongues under surgery in the misguided hope that that will dramatically improve their English pronunciation, namely so that their children will better pronounce the sound “r.” She used Korea’s equivalent of Twitter to express this opinion and it gained wide media attention. She wrote in Korean: “Mothers are crazy about English…I’m annoyed that mothers are reading children English books when they have yet to perfect Korean pronunciation… Is our mother tongue a laughable matter?” This critique combined her criticism of the overzealousness of Korean mothers towards their children’s education and also their lack of national pride in Korea’s mother tongue. It is significant to note that Horan equates the Korean language with the Korean people, and the over-the-top focus on English learning a betrayal to national, patriotic interests.

5 *JoongAng Ilbo*, 12/14/2008 “Korea’s Endless Grapple with English”
Opinions of such public figures gain a lot of media attention and influence how local actors understand and experience English. All in all, as such public outcries by celebrities demonstrate, the current attitude towards English in South Korea could be summed up as ambivalence towards whether English is a positive or negative presence in South Korea.

**Stress on Families and Children: Tongue Surgery and Goose Fathers**

Popular media representations of the English learning boom in Korea frequently showcase the impact it has on Korean families. Family is the sacred, fundamental unit of society in contemporary South Korea, an influence of the country’s Confucian heritage, so naturally this topic garners much media attention. For instance, “If You Were Me” (2003) is an omnibus film, consisting of six short films directed by six Korean directors. A project started by South Korea’s National Human Rights Commission, each of the short films within this larger work deals with a different pressing social problem in Korea. Director Park Jin-pyo in “Tongue Tie” critiques the over-the-top education fervor in Korea, particularly towards English education. “Tongue Tie” begins with a father and mother video-recording their son’s performance in an English play at a kindergarten. In the highly competitive environment of modern South Korea, a child’s academic and professional success depends enormously on parents managing the child’s English education. It is in this background that an unusual tongue surgery for children becomes popular among Korean parents, one that cuts a part of a child’s tongue so that they can pronounce English more like a ‘native’ speaker. Park ruthlessly films every minute of this gruesome surgery, forcing the audience to cringe hearing the child scream in pain. This painful process of watching the mother hold her son down for this absurd surgery is
intended to critique Korean society’s frantic rat race that even violates human rights of innocent children.

Most of this twelve-minute film is the surgery sequence of the screaming young boy operated on by a friendly doctor. Park in the DVD interview for the film says that the most effort went into the set design of the doctor’s office; he says that he created an exaggerated fairytale-like office, decorated with aquariums and artificial gardens, to create a warm, welcoming setting for this brutal surgery, making the contrast even more dramatic. The set design dramatizes the fact that under such guises of parental love and medical care, such atrocious acts of human violation can happen to children. The bizarre reality of exploitative doctor offices where nurses wear bunny suits to make the surgery more ‘children-friendly’ is unkindly documented by Park. He says that it is hard himself to watch the surgery sequence, but says that he wanted “to show the fact that something that we cannot even face to watch is actually happening in this society.” He challenges the viewers to watch it “even if it is painful to watch, so that the audience can come face to face with the fact that such things are allowed to happen in our society.” He hopes that after the short film is over, the audience, with the child, has experienced first-hand the pain and absurdity of such a surgery, and that they will be called to see their own complicity in letting such atrocities happen in their society.

Park Jin-pyo’s film – even though it was not a mainstream, Blockbuster-style film that scored high in the box office – nonetheless brought some critical attention to the anxieties of modern Korean society that has led to intense competition and unease about survival, particularly in the excessive education fervor imposed on children. The presence
of such critical voices in the media makes it difficult for average Koreans to entirely ignore the negative consequences of such a fervent English learning boom.

Another Korean response to English education that has aroused concern in the media is in a phenomenon called the ‘goose father.’ Goose father is a Korean father who works in Korea, while his wife and children are abroad in an English-speaking country for the sake of their education, mainly acquiring English. The term was coined by the fact that the geese as a species migrate, just as a Korean father has to travel a far distance to see his family. There are estimated to be about 200,000 goose daddies nationwide, according to Samsung Economic Resource Institute (SERI). The mothers are seen as the modern-day successors to one of the most famous mothers in East Asia: the mother of Mencius, the fourth-century Chinese Confucian philosopher. In a story well-known in South Korea, as well as China and Japan, Mencius’s mother moved to three neighborhoods before finding the environment most favorable to her son’s education.

However, this phenomenon is the first time that South Korean parents’ dedication to their children’s education has split wives from husbands and children from fathers. It has also upended traditional migration patterns by which men went overseas temporarily while their wives and children stayed home, straining marriages and the Confucian ideal of the traditional Korean family. The cost of maintaining two household locations typically stress family budgets since most wives cannot work outside South Korea because of visa restrictions. Depictions of the goose father phenomenon in South Korean popular media are generally negative – even if the Mencius’s mother analogy is intended

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6 Korea Times, 4/2/2008 “History of English Education in Korea”
7 New York Times, 6/8/2008 “For English Studies, Koreans Say Goodbye to Dad”
to praise the dedication of such mothers – highlighting the stress on otherwise happy marriages and families that the English education fervor has wrought. Stories of lonely, suffering fathers who feel as if they are money-making machines, children who have no emotional connections to their fathers or Korea, and mothers or fathers cheating on their spouses in their respective locations are frequently heard in the news or television dramas. Such negative, often scandalous, stories circulating in the popular media about the goose father phenomenon may have the effect of increasing the number of Koreans questioning the value of such a sacrifice for the sake of their children’s English education.

Part of the media attention on the goose father phenomenon highlights the state’s official response to the ‘problem.’ The goose father phenomenon was seen as a ‘problem’ warranting governmental response. For instance, President Lee Myung-bak publicly announced he would start to address the problem by hiring 10,000 English teachers. Several top government officials publicly called the goose father phenomenon a serious, unfortunate problem, and even went so far as to claim that unhappiness over education’s financial and psychological costs is one of the largest reasons for the country’s low birthrate, which, at 1.26 in 2007, was one of the world’s lowest.\(^8\) One possible effect of such media coverage is that a growing number of Koreans may begin see the goose father phenomenon – and the larger English learning boom – in a more critical, informed light. Another effect is that the ‘problem’ is seen as a daunting, huge national issue, beyond the scope and control of single individual families. Everyday Koreans – whether or not part of the goose father phenomenon personally – may feel powerless about how to solve the

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\(^8\) *New York Times*, 6/8/2008 “For English Studies, Koreans Say Goodbye to Dad”
‘problem,’ and continue to let the goose father phenomenon flourish, whether by actively participating in it or sympathetically ‘condoning’ others who take part in it.

*New York Times* recently reported in October 2010 how Jeju Island, the Hawaii of South Korea off the southern coast of the country, is conducting an educational experiment concerning English learning. The plan is by 2015 to open twelve prestigious Western schools in a government-financed “Jeju Global Education City,” a self-contained community where everyone will speak only English. This is part of the state’s effort to keep Korean families together by giving Korean families the opportunity to give their children a more global, Western-style, and English-language curriculum without having to send them abroad. This new effort is part of the state’s effort to address such problems, along with an economic agenda to attract foreign investment and make Korea more foreigner (and investment) friendly.

However, the article hints that the new developments are flawed with the same problems already marring English education in the South Korean mainland. There are concerns that the Jeju schools will be “schools for the rich” and even if the schools are physically located in Korea, the same eager worshipping of Western degrees and English education is perpetuated, this time more directly urged on by the state. As education also becomes more and more influenced by the forces of globalization, an increasing number of Western schools are ambitious about expanding to Asia where there is cachet to having a Western-style education. How this is fueling or changing the English boom in Asian countries, such as South Korea, will be an interesting area of future research.

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9 *New York Times*, 8/22/2010 “Western Schools Sprout in South Korea”
10 Duke University is also part of the educational globalization movement, setting up campuses in Asia, such as Singapore and mainland China.
Worries About Excessive Spending without Corresponding Effectiveness

Another facet of the English boom that has received wide media attention concerns massive spending on English education that fails to deliver effective results. The proportion of education costs to household spending in Korea is three to nine times higher than in advanced nations, a report released by the Bank of Korea in 2009. Among these high education costs, South Koreans are spending $15.3 billion a year on private English lessons, according to the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI), claiming 1.9 percentage of South Korea’s GDP. Alongside high media attention on statistics that highlight the high spending on English education are worries about the ineffectiveness of such spending. For example, the Guardian article reports the following numbers on spending and performances on English tests: each year Koreans spend $752 million on tests of English, with a large proportion of this being spent on the TOEFL assessment test produced by the American company ETS. South Korea is one of the world’s largest market for TOEFL, yet, according to a 2004 report by the Korea Government Information Agency, South Koreans ranked 110th on ETS’s global TOEFL rankings. More than 1,000 expatriate managers of multinational companies polled by Hong Kong’s Political and Economic Risk Consultancy rated South Koreans as the worst English speakers in Asia in a 2005 survey.

Another set of news reports circulating in the media discuss the issue of English Villages sprouting all over South Korea. English Villages are government-sponsored projects that create mock replicas of a stereotypical Western village; visitors can only

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11 Chosun Ilbo, 10/19/2009 “Korean Education Spending Far Higher Than in the West”
12 Guardian, 12/15/2006 “Appetite for Language Costs South Korea Dear”
speak English in the village and can experience how travelling and living abroad in an English-speaking country might be like, from going through the immigration office at the airport to ordering a meal at a restaurant. Media reports have brought the public’s attention to the fact that despite the immense costs in creating these replicas of Western towns, this model of language acquisition in such a short time span is far from practical or cost-effective.\textsuperscript{13} The \textit{Guardian} article argues that the reason for the rapid spread of English Villages may have more to do with politics. Local politicians can win votes by setting up villages and they are lucrative ‘make-work’ projects for construction firms.

The government also recruits foreign teachers under its English Program in Korea (EPIK) plan, but there have been frequent media reports about the corruption and mismanagement since its launch in 1996. Beside scandalous news reports of poor housing conditions and contractual scams of the program, EPIK teachers have been portrayed by some media reports as human tape players, who are thrown into classrooms of forty students or more with little to no training. It has supposedly resulted in a high turnover rate of teachers and Korean students receiving less than the best despite the large amount of funding that goes into running the EPIK program. Media reports doubting the effectiveness of government-led English enterprises like English Villages or the EPIK program have brought about public concern that the English education fervor has led to a waste of some national resources.

Overall, such reports in the media highlight widespread worries that Koreans are wasting valuable money and time on an endeavor that is bringing them little rewards. Even when government initiates well-intentioned efforts to improve the public sector’s

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Guardian}, 12/15/2006 “Appetite for Language Costs South Korea Dear"
English education to rein in private spending, there are concerns that new English policies intended to improve the quality of learning (for instance, from grammar and reading-based English learning to conversation and writing-based language education) only add anxiety to families who feel they need extra private spending to meet the new expectations. Chung Cheong-rae, a lawmaker from the United Democratic Party, publicly spoke out his opinion in the media that the new English reforms put forward by current President Lee Myung-bak has not been planned well and will only benefit families with high incomes.14 “This policy will fuel the private education market, and those in Gangnam [a wealthy area in southern Seoul, the site of my fieldwork] are the only ones who can afford to keep up. What about the countryside and other places?” Chung asked.

Alongside such publicly-made comments in the media are statistics from the National Statistical Office, revealing that average monthly spending on private education from January to March in 2009 for the top 20 percent of society was 715,308 won, as against 165,842 won for the bottom 20 percent, a striking gap.15 Kim Hee-sam, a researcher at the Korea Development Institute, said in the same news article: “In the past, there was a greater degree of fluidity between social classes so we could often see rags-to-riches stories, and anyone could better themselves if they had the will to do so. Such societies are truly healthy. But now everything has changed.” He warned that education will likely become yet another “caste system” if Korea fails to rectify the vicious cycle of educational inequality caused by differences in income.

14 JoongAng Ilbo, 12/14/2008 “Korea’s Endless Grapple with English”
15 Chosun Ilbo, 8/1/2009 “Education Gap Between Rich and Poor Growing”
So although English learning can ideally be a means for social mobility in South Korea, such media reports bring the public’s attention to the sobering reality that access to private English education is so stratified by class in Korea that the English boom can contribute to the hyper-competitiveness of Korea society and worsen the class gap. By bringing in the issue of class and accessibility, such media reports bring in critical perspective to the fantasy promised by private English institutions or the government that English improvement is accessible to all who have the desire and diligence.

To sum, there are concerns circulating in the popular media that high spending on private English education – which has worsened social inequalities by enabling only those with money to participate in the pricey English education market – has not led to the expected degree of corresponding benefits. Such concerns have led some Koreans to debate whether there is a fundamental problem with the Korean-style English education system that focuses on test strategies than real improvement. In response to such media attention, it is significant to note that there is more concern on pedagogical issues of English teaching to Koreans than a more fundamental reflection on whether English should be so important in Korean society in the first place.

Although such reports are in the macro scale, dealing with the situation on a national and international level, average Koreans reading such media reports may be able to relate to the situation on an individual level: ‘how much money did I pay in tuition and textbooks at my English hakwon last month? If I didn’t use all that money and time on English, what else could I have done with those limited resources? How come despite all my investments, my TOEFL score has been stagnant for the last year and I still feel scared every time I have a job interview in English?’
**The Effect of the Popular Media on the English Experience of South Koreans**

This discourse analysis of the Korean popular media surrounding the issue of English demonstrated how powerful of a site the popular media is in shaping how average Koreans think about English and experience English on a daily basis. I argued that discussions and representations of English floating about in the popular media surrounding South Koreans address five large concerns surrounding the experience of English: 1) the excessive educational fanaticism of Korean parents and students, 2) alarm that the obsession with English is a betrayal of nationalistic interests, 3) feelings of inadequacy and inferiority arising from perceiving English as an impossible-to-master and alienating language, 4) apprehension that the excessive English boom is destroying the tradition and stability of Korean families, 5) and lastly, fears that English learning as it is now is a waste of time and money on both the national and individual scale. These concerns expose that underneath the seeming enthusiasm towards English learning, there is a concurrent widespread negative reaction to the ‘excessive’ growth of English’s importance in Korea, which reveals itself all over popular media.

Such public critique of the excessive English boom in the popular media indeed works to raise public awareness about the dark sides of the current status quo with English learning. However, it also powerfully reinforces the notion that English is indeed important in Korean society and cannot be ignored. For instance, even if popular Korean television shows deal with the negative ramifications of the ‘goose father’ phenomenon or the excessive (and often back-breaking) spending on private English education, this indirectly confirms latent fears that a growing number of families are indeed spending that much time, money, and effort for their own or children’s English learning – even if
English still remains an impossible-to-master language and returns less-than-efficient results.

Ambivalent, conflicted reactions to the rise of English in Korea can come from the frequent exposures to media representations of English surrounding South Koreans every day. Such reactions could serve to confirm the status quo: English ability remains a highly desired asset that people are willing to excessively and eagerly invest in, while despite the growing pervasiveness of English, English remains an ‘us versus them’ issue, with English remaining as a foreign, difficult, and alienating language belonging to the ‘Others.’
Chapter Three: English Learning in South Korea: Where Pragmatism and Fantasy Meet

Using ethnographic material from three weeks of field work in Seoul during the summer of 2010, this chapter will show that English in Korea today experienced by college students is both a down-to-earth pragmatic survival skill and also a set of fantasies about what English can do for their identities and future prospects. English plays such a powerful role in Korean society because it plays to both the pragmatic and fetishistic desires of average Koreans. This chapter will also closely deal with the issues of class, capital, ideology, and commodification embedded within the world of English in South Korea.

Undying Desire to Learn English: the Case of Hyeok-Gyu

During my field work the summer of 2010, I was living in an o-pi-seu-tel (a Konglish word blending the English words ‘office’ and ‘hotel’) near Gangnam station, my main physical field site in Seoul, South Korea. I decided to enroll myself in a gym nearby, just to prevent gaining weight from all the good Korean food easily available in my field site. It turned out that the owner of that gym was a resident of my o-pi-seu-tel, the reason why so many advertisement flyers for the gym were posted outside my door and hallways. It was there that I met an informant who I did not initially imagine at all would be relevant to my research. Hyeok-Gyu was a personal trainer at the gym and he was already familiar with my friend who enrolled in the gym few weeks earlier (my friend, So-Ra, graduated from Duke in 2010 and is now tutoring English in Seoul before she plans on attending law school). Hyeok-Gyu knew that So-Ra and I were from America and showed interest in us. So-Ra and I would often speak in English at the gym,
so he knew that we were fluent English speakers. He seemed to me very shy, but gradually, little by little, he found opportunities to talk to me. (Looking back, I think he was more intimidated by my English abilities and/or international background than being generally shy, since on observation I could later notice that he is normally a talkative individual who actively recruits clients for personal training at the gym.) He said he did not have an English name and asked if I could think of one for him. Surprised to have been given such a responsibility by a stranger, I lightheartedly gave him the name Kevin, but the joke eventually stuck and So-Ra and I would often call him Kevin instead.

At first, I thought he was just being friendly as part of the job of being a personal trainer. The more gym members who would sign up for his private training sessions, the more money he would be taking back at the end of the month. However, I soon discovered that he wanted to become friends with me because he was very interested in learning English and intrigued by the fact that I was from America. He wanted to meet outside of the gym and learn English from me. I agreed because honestly, I felt sympathetic and disturbed, at the same time, at how desperate he seemed in wanting to improve his English. We met at a coffee shop near the gym and first, I asked him about his English abilities. He bashfully said his English was terrible, that he had almost no basics. He was the same age as me, which means technically he should be a college senior. But he said he was never a model student, because he was an athlete his whole life. He entered college by virtue of his athletic abilities, but he said he soon came to see that the possibility of making it as a top athlete and making a decent living as an athlete would be slim. He, then, dropped out of college and first spent two years in the military, a requirement for any able-bodied Korean male. He jokingly said that in his down time in
the military, he would study some introductory English learning books he bought. He then went to the Philippines and Australia to learn English. I was shocked at how he left for those countries to learn English, but with a very vague sense of what he wanted to do with English or whether learning English abroad was even appropriate for his English ability. He said that he wasted a lot of time and money in those countries, because he ended up meeting a lot of Koreans in those places and just fooled around instead. He fondly recalled drinking the famous Filipino beer San Miguel on the beaches of Cebu or taking road trips with Korean friends in Australia. But regardless, he seemed certain that he needed to learn English again seriously and that English was important and necessary for a successful career and life.

Despite the failures of improving his English during his study abroad adventures, Hyeok-Gyu’s dream of wanting to learn English did not die. He was tired of being a personal trainer, and he said he had greater ambitions. He wanted to go to America, “maybe Philadelphia” where one of his childhood friends, who now goes by the English name Oscar, is attending college, and learn English. “Why do you want to learn English?” I asked. He said “maybe [he] wants to be a physical therapist and [he] could get the necessary degree in the U.S. after learning English.” It was all very vague, but for Hyeok-Gyu, English and America seemed to be the tokens to a better life. He was openly admiring of my ability to speak English and enthusiastically fascinated with life in America. Although he had been abroad to other English-speaking countries, for Hyeok-Gyu, America was a place that would be even more exciting and spectacular.

What did English mean for Hyeok-Gyu? He had no well thought-out plan of why and how he wanted to learn English and what he wanted to do with his English abilities.
The only thing he was certain of was that he wanted to learn it. English for Hyeok-Gyu was a powerful symbol of being educated, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan. Although it was not carefully thought out, he also considered English essential to getting a better career and surviving in the local context. Out of all my informants, Hyeok-Gyu was perhaps the most naïve and uncritical in his outlook at the status of English in Korea, which almost made me worry for him. When I discussed Hyeok-Gyu’s field notes with my friend So-Ra, she spoke confidently that he would certainly fail in his efforts to learn English and it would be a big waste of money and time to go to America.

*A Multidimensional Look at the Experience of English in Korea Today*

**A Tool for Survival and a Set of Fantasies**

What does Hyeok-Gyu’s story tell us about what English means in contemporary Korean society for college-aged students? English is first a pragmatic, ‘necessary’ survival tool that can grant one access to more opportunities in the local context. It is also a set of fantasies about what English can do for one’s identity and future. Once entering college, Korean students manage their own education and future. Whether or not one is an English major (or even attending college), most college-aged students in South Korea continue with their English education in preparation for the competitive post-graduation job search. Ranging from test preparation for examinations like the TOEIC, TOEFL, or TEPS (Test of English Proficiency developed by Seoul National University), to *peu-ri to-king* (“free talking”) classes for job interviews or the OPIC (Oral Proficiency Interview-computer) exam required for company promotions, a Korean student’s battle with English does not end with acceptance to college but wages on stressfully throughout
one’s college years as well. They are also aware that English proficiency and test scores will continue to haunt them, since not only do many universities have mandatory English test score requirements for graduation but future companies will also decide who gets promoted or is given prestigious, higher-paying international opportunities based on English abilities. The more savvy, academically successful students knew how English worked by growing up battling with English and knowing well the rules of the battle. These ‘rules’ of the battle ranged from knowing what kinds of TOEIC scores were needed to get certain competitive jobs; which famous TOEFL instructors were teaching in which private English institutes; how to cost-effectively and time-efficiently improve their English abilities through a combination of self-studying, using free Internet resources, and finding the socioeconomic and/or English level-appropriate private English institutes or study abroad options.

Hyeok-Gyu’s case was particularly enlightening because he was not the typical college-attending student in Seoul, who had savvy knowledge of how English ‘worked’ in the local context. One thing Hyeok-Gyu thought, which was across the board with all my informants to some extent to another, was the firm belief that English ability was necessary and that not being able to use English is a deficiency. Not being able to use English words appropriately in conversations or understanding English prevalently used in the local media is a reason for shame, a deficiency that hints one is most likely from the countryside, not-so-educated, or belonging to the lower socioeconomic class. The role English plays, then, in the construction of the modern Korean identity is significant. Hyeok-Gyu desires to learn English, not simply because it can open doors of opportunities for him, but also because he sees English as key to fitting in, in the local.
Gangnam station, where the gym that he works at is located by, is teeming with Korea’s social elite (and wannabes), who drop English words in conversations when perfectly acceptable Korean equivalents exist, flaunt their English fluency with other foreign-educated Korean or American/Australian/Canadian/British expat friends, and proudly carry around English learning books, as if they are signs that one is on the glamorous path to success and cosmopolitanism.

It is significant to note that some college students – including one of my informants who resided in the suburbs of Seoul – are willing to commute up to four hours to attend the English institutes by Gangnam station, largely because many famous, popular English teachers\(^{16}\) work in the Gangnam English institutes, but also because the area by Gangnam station, the ‘local’ of this study, is considered an elite, prestigious location, occupied by rich, educated, and powerful residents and working professionals. In order to fit in that local, Hyeok-Gyu feels English is simply necessary. What Hyeok-Gyu feels towards English is a combination of his ‘naïve,’ fetishistic conviction that English can transform him into a sophisticated, cosmopolitan individual and his sensible realization that Korean society, as it is now, demands him to know English to be a functioning and successful adult.

**Socioeconomic Class and English Education**

The fact that Hyeok-Gyu’s parents were able to afford his studying abroad in Philippines and Australia speaks to the fact that he belongs to at least the middle class.

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\(^{16}\) Usually these ‘star’ English instructors are Korean, since the emphasis at such private English institutions is to teach strategies and tricks for English exams. There is widespread acceptance that Korean instructors are superior at teaching such material, since they themselves are not native English speakers and know the ‘Korean’ way to learn English.
He said he was saving up from working as a personal trainer so that he could go to America next year. Money and socioeconomic class are important factors in English learning. Although public school incorporates English education from elementary school, the English learning experience in South Korea cannot be talked about without the heavy, widespread presence of the private English industry. There is a wide range of price offerings in private English education, but it is important to note that the ability to afford expensive, prestigious options speak to class standings. Particularly in my field site of the Gangnam station, part of the Gangnam district of Seoul, English learning is particularly expensive and targets a certain class of people who can afford it.

Thus, class is an indispensable part of how English is experienced in Korea. Although English education is technically free and incorporated into the public education system, it is widely accepted by Koreans that private English education is unavoidable and necessary to be competitive candidates for top Korean universities and companies. Hyeok-Gyu desires to learn English and go to America to study English because he wants to no longer be a personal trainer, a career he considers temporary and beneath him, and wants to upgrade himself to a Western-educated, English-speaking physical therapist. Part of Hyeok-Gyu’s draw to English was because high English proficiency has come to signify a certain class standing and educational status in the Korean context. His desires to belong to the socially elite local and become successful are thus intimately tied to his desires to improve his English. Studying abroad in America for English (as opposed to using free English learning resources on the Internet) is something Hyeok-Gyu desires, precisely because that ability to go to America speaks to a high socioeconomic status, if not his current status then his future, potential status after ‘mastering’ English. As Hyeok-
Gyu’s case shows, the widespread valorization of English is profoundly linked to Koreans’ general desire to climb the social ladder and belong to the social elite.

Commodification of Education and English Learning

English has become a form of commodity in the South Korean context. English education has a high exchange value in the Korean marketplace; it is something that people are willing to ‘buy’ with money and accept as being a high value. Karl Marx (1867) describes that once objects enter into market exchange, fetishism of the commodity occurs, in which the origins of the objects are lost and they are viewed as if they had mystical qualities, beyond their simple use values. Just as Marx had described, English as a commodity is endowed with mystical qualities. It is a fetishized object, an object that symbolizes modernity, cosmopolitanism, and social distinction in the minds of South Koreans. The proliferation of the private English industry in South Korea that benefits from Koreans’ ‘obsession’ with ‘buying’ English is thus a result of the commodification of English. All of my informants have experience paying money to acquire English (aside from the public English education which is free), and in most cases, the more one pays, the more prestigious the purchase is considered. Claiming that one has paid a high amount of money per hour for an English tutor is something to flaunt in South Korea, because the more expensive English learning option is considered generally superior with more ‘value,’ and also it obviously speaks to one’s class standings.

One of the reasons why Hyeok-Gyu may have been so willing to share the fact that he had studied abroad in the Philippines and Australia, even though they could be
considered embarrassing personal (and purchase) failures, is the same reason why one might openly brag about an expensive purchase of a car or a condominium. Going abroad to learn English is the most highly valued, expensive, and prestigious option in the private English education market, and Hyeok-Gyu was a proud purchaser of that option, enough so that he was saving up to buy it again, this time to America.

Languages, once intimate, inalienable parts of people’s identities, are now objects to buy in global capitalism, some languages considered to be worth more than others. Which languages are worth more is also a result of unequal producer relations, as described by Marx. Why is English education considered to be more valuable with a higher exchange value than, say, a Japanese or Spanish education? This is largely because in the contemporary Korean context, the English language is a commodity of greater value and fetishistic desire than others. The startling reality that Korea today spends 2 percentage of its GDP on English is unmistakable proof that English has evolved into a language-commodity that is highly valued in the Korean market. Why are many of my informants (and their parents) willing to spend their hard-earned money on private English education? Why not use that money to learn French, ballet, or flute? Why use it on learning at all? This is the result of a specific historical-social context in South Korea; Korea has come to deem English as something valuable and worthy of spending often back-breaking amounts of money on, and Korea’s Confucian heritage makes Koreans value education over other things, regarding educational achievements as a good reflection of one’s social status and character, and has led Koreans to consider education as the most respectable means to climb the social ladder.
English as Cultural and Social Capital

In South Korea, how good your English (or to be exact, how high your TOEIC or TOEFL scores are) is often a reflection of your socioeconomic class status than anything else. As previously described, English has evolved into a form of commodity that is widely coveted and purchased with money. However, English is not only an economic capital, but also cultural and social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Capital had once been assumed to be economic in nature, following Karl Marx, but Bourdieu argued that capital can be present in multiple forms in human societies. English is indeed an economic capital in South Korea; learning English is a relatively expensive endeavor that only those who can afford it financially can enjoy (at least in regards to the private English education sector). English in Korea is however also cultural and social capital. From interviews with informants, I discovered that the cultural and social knowledge necessary to successfully navigate the world of English in South Korea is beyond simple economics.

For instance, even if one had the wealth to purchase English, knowing where and how to learn English was closely linked to cultural and social capital. Who knows which private institutions have the best TOEIC or TEPS teachers (or knows people who know), which online discussion boards or communities have the most insider knowledge to upcoming English exams or foreign exchange programs in American colleges, what the cut-off English scores are to work for Samsung or LG Electronics: all of these can be interpreted as social and cultural capital. In Seoul, South Korea, English is thus a combination of economic, social, and cultural capital.
Navigating the complex, expensive world of English education in South Korea speaks to a person’s economic luxury; a person who is struggling to put the food on the table or pay rent may not have such time and money to spend in English. Thus at the core of English education is still economic capital, since without the financial capability, it is much more difficult to have the right cultural and social capital in the first place. In the case of informant Yong-Ju (see Chapter Four), his parents could afford to pay for (and also to even know about) programs like the prestigious and competitive Minsa High School’s summer English camp. On the other extreme, Hyeok-Gyu went to the Philippines and Australia and ‘wasted’ money and time, because he did not have the necessary capital to successfully navigate the private English education industry. The reason why So-Ra said she was confident that Hyeok-Gyu would fail once again when he goes to America to study English was because she considered Hyeok-Gyu lacking in the right social and cultural capital to know what English learning option was appropriate for his path in life or education background, not because she thought he lacked the necessary financial access to go abroad like she did. So-Ra herself went abroad first at a young age when her father was an exchange professor and later returned as a home-stay student in high school, after which she attended Duke University and successfully graduated; she considered herself a success case of the study abroad option, who had the right mix of money, insider knowledge, and personal connections, while she thought Hyeok-Gyu did not. The different forms of capital are linked to one another in a circular way; economic capital allows for the accumulation of cultural and social capital, while cultural and social capital, in turn, allows one to gain more economic capital. The complex, expensive private English industry in Korea makes it that only those with the right kinds of capital
will reap the benefits. English is thus a significant form of capital that gives privilege to some, while disadvantages others.

To summarize, the private English industry is tremendously booming and profitable in South Korea because English education has become a valorized commodity people are willing to buy at a high cost. It is a form of economic capital that one can buy with money, leading to those in the higher socioeconomic class having much easier access to it. It is not only an economic capital, though: as shown in the case of Hyeok-Gyu, although he seemed to be from at least a middle class family, he lacked the social and cultural capital to navigate the private English industry in South Korea successfully. I, along with So-Ra, define success as 1) using one’s money in the most cost-effective way that 2) brings about improvements in one’s English abilities, 3) thereby achieving a clearly-identified goal with what to do with that acquired English ability. Note that Hyeok-Gyu does not meet any one of these factors, with the result being that those like So-Ra consider him to be a doomed-to-failure case. Since most of his friends and family members did not belong to a certain class that was well-versed in the world of private English education, he did not know who to ask about effectively learning English and finding appropriate study abroad options. As a result, he was eager and desperate to even talk to unfamiliar, new gym members like me or So-Ra to gain some insider knowledge and advice. Who are the beneficiaries of such a world where English ability reigns supreme and expensive private English education flourishes? Not only does the private English industry obviously prospers, but the social elite class who has the social, cultural, economic capital to purchase and exploit its English ability to claim superiority is the next apparent benefactors of such a world.
Ideologies Surrounding English in Korea

A productive way to think about the English learning boom in South Korea is through the lens of ideology. Althusser (1971) describes ideology as a way society interpellates individuals into subjects. Once a subject, an individual loses absolute freedom and is unconsciously restricted by an invisible system of power and control. Ideology controls individuals’ thoughts and actions, leading to their submission to the rules of the established order. From the moment they enter the world, individuals are steeped in ideology in order to conscientiously perform their appropriate roles based on the established order. What, then, are the various ideologies surrounding English learning in South Korea? How can English function as an ideology that interpellates South Koreans into certain kinds of subjects? What kind of established order are South Koreans submitting to by accepting the ideologies of English? What kinds of subjectivities are formed from submitting to such ideologies? Who is benefiting from South Koreans submitting to such ideologies? Why do my informants unquestioningly accept as true that English is a useful language? Why do they feel their English is always still inadequate? Why do they feel that without English, they are not modern, cosmopolitan, and educated? These questions all rise from the ideologies surrounding English, which make South Koreans think and act a certain way towards the English language.

A significant intersection between ideology and socioeconomic class occurs in how English has become intimately part of the ruling class ideology in South Korea. The importance of English and becoming a ‘global talent’ is propagated by the local elite class who has the capital to buy English and the private English industry which can enormously profit from the English boom. Song (2011) argues that “education, under the
cover of the ideology of merit, serves as the primary mechanism of elimination that conserves the hierarchy of power relations already established in South Korean society.” Educational achievements is one of the most determining factor of socioeconomic class in South Korea, but instead of education functioning as the so-called great equalizer, only the privileged classes have the means to help their children excel academically (Song 2011: 44). When someone achieves the valorized high educational status, it is thought to be solely the result of hard work, but under the façade of meritocracy, socio-economic status limits one’s mobility in powerful ways. Song describes how Korea’s hierarchical structure of power relations is considerably “more rigid and less mutable than those attested in most other developed countries,” compared to Japan or the United States (2011: 43).

Specifically, Song explores how English has been “recruited, under the guise of globalization, to exploit the meretricious ideology of merit to the advantage of the privileged classes and to the disadvantage of the other classes of the society.” In the larger Korean context of proliferating private after-school instruction, Song argues that no other kinds of private instruction may surpass private English language education “now that English is regarded as one of the major subjects – in effect, the most important subject – in the national school curriculum” (2011: 45). The privileged class has the most at stake to maintain and propagate the myth of English as an important language, since the myth allows them privilege over those who cannot afford to buy English. The nationwide obsession with English education – most specifically with pricey private English instruction – is, then, ultimately serving the interests of the privileged class who can afford to buy it. Song is arguing that in South Korea, globalization – although it is a
convenient and attractive-sounding cause – is not the only cause for the importance of English, as it is widely claimed to be, but the Korean English boom is part of the local ‘obsession’ with educational achievements and the widely prevalent myth of meritocracy. Song scathingly criticizes the local privileged classes and politicians “who fail or refuse to recognize South Korea’s ‘obsession with English’ as what it really is” – a tool to maintain the privileged class – and instead propagates the convenient, popular discourse of globalization to protect the status quo (2011:50).

I saw the reality of Song’s claims in one of my informants, Yong-Ju, who will be introduced in Chapter Four. An elite student attending one of highest-ranked universities in the country, Yong-Ju argued that English ability and English test scores are useful and necessary to see how diligent a student has been throughout the course of his or her academic life. Since English cannot be improved overnight, he argued that it is helpful to tell which student has studied harder than the others, making it a good standard to have in university or company admissions. Yong-Ju argued that test-oriented English education in Korea, which results in students generally deficient in practical English skills – like speaking – is still very useful because “it is a fair way to compare students.” Yong-Ju argued that high schools all over Korea have different GPA grading systems, resulting in chaos when trying to compare students fairly for college admissions. There is a yearly national college entrance examination (equivalent to the SATs) that is critical in getting into a top university since GPAs are considered too unreliable in comparing students. English test scores (such as TOEIC, TOEFL, or TEPS) are another ‘fair’ indicator, in Yong-Ju’s opinion. Since English improvement takes years of hard work, he argued that such English test scores were highly useful in proving your diligence.
Although I do not know Yong-Ju’s exact socioeconomic background, I argue that Yong-Ju, by virtue of being a student at one of the elite universities in a country that places education as the supreme means of climbing the social ladder, most likely belongs and will continue to belong to the higher echelons of Korean society. His unquestioning acceptance that English ability equals merit and hard work shows his complete and absolute internalization of what Song argues is the ruling class ideology embedded in English learning. He does not realize that those in the lower socioeconomic classes may not have the right capital to achieve the English ability he takes for granted and attributes his English proficiency solely to his personal diligence.

Another key beneficiary of the English learning boom in South Korea is the private English education sector. Private English institutes play a crucial role in the spread of ideologies that stress the necessity and importance of English learning. For instance, I picked up the advertisement for YBM by Gangnam Station and in the advertisement student-models talk about how YBM TOEIC speaking classes will guarantee your employment to large, competitive firms and how YBM TOEIC classes will guarantee you a high score in a short period of time. The English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in South Korea has gone through stratospheric growth in the last several decades (Prey 2005). For instance, YBM, founded over 40 years ago, grew up under the ‘neo-imperial’ conditions set by the U.S. after the Korean War and has now become one of the most popular private institutes in my field site of Gangnam Station, along with Hackers and Pagoda. Meanings of English in South Korea are negotiated and created by different actors, including not only the students/consumers and the state, but the private
English education sector that has everything to lose if English lost its cachet in Korean society.

Park (2009) insightfully proposes three major ideologies surrounding English learning in South Korea: ideologies of necessitation, externalization, and self-deprecation. By necessitation, he means the ideology of seeing English as a language one must learn in order to survive and succeed in the world of globalization. The ideology of externalization views English as a language of the ‘Other,’ treating it as an alienating language that is opposed to the identity of one’s own group. Lastly, the idea of Koreans lacking competency to use English comfortably and meaningfully, despite the abundance of English education they receive, is called the ideology of self-deprecation. Based on my own ethnographic research, I agree with Park’s proposal and argue that the three ideologies are indeed alive and well in Korea today. The ideology of necessitation is most apparently propagated by the state that has popularized the ideal of an English-speaking ‘global citizen’ to Koreans for nationalistic reasons and the local private English industry for profit reasons. This ideology has spread to every nook and cranny of Korea, with the ideology deeply internalized by average Korean individuals; recall how my informant Hyeok-Gyu had no doubt in his mind about the absolute importance and necessity of learning English. The online cartoon discussed in Chapter Two captures well the ideologies of externalization and self-deprecation. The Koreans in the restaurant tragically falls into silence when a blonde-haired, blue-eyed foreigner walks into ask for directions. The Koreans described in the comic feel English is an uncomfortable language that belongs firmly to foreigners (despite the fact that they have learned it many
years in official schooling) and feel their English is too poor for them to feel confident giving out simple directions to an English-speaking foreigner.

Hyeok-Gyu is a living example of all three of these ideologies. Unconsciously but powerfully influenced by the ideology of necessitation, he unquestioningly accepts English learning as essential to his future prospects in a growingly globalizing Korea. Whether or not he will be in a career that demands English on a usual basis, he has internalized the importance of English to being an ideal, ‘global’ Korean citizen. I still recall vividly how intimidated Hyeok-Gyu was to approach me, English-speaking and from the far, far land of America. To Hyeok-Gyu, my mastery of the English language placed me in a foreigner category, and despite my obvious Korean appearance and fluency in Korean, he always treated me as a foreigner who was temporarily visiting Korea. This was because no matter how long he had been exposed to English in school and in the media, English always remained an alienating, difficult, and uncomfortable language to Hyeok-Gyu. Whenever Hyeok-Gyu and I seriously or jokingly practiced English together, he was always embarrassed and shy of speaking to me, despite his enthusiastic desire to improve English. When I first asked Hyeok-Gyu how his English was, his immediate response was that it was terrible. He was acutely conscious of his accent or grammar, and often covered up his discomfort and embarrassment with jokes and laughter, as if he was purposely and humorously speaking poorly and awkwardly. Along with the many netizens who agreed with the comic discussed above, Hyeok-Gyu had internalized the ideology that English belongs to confident foreign native speakers and that Koreans are bad in English.
Each of Park’s three ideologies privileges certain parties over others, for instance the local elite over the lower socioeconomic classes, and the foreigners who ‘own’ English over Koreans. The very fact that such an uneven spread of privileges exists signifies that certain parties are willing and eager to maintain the ideologies that grant them those exact privileges. English-speaking countries or Western establishments like the English Testing Service (ETS) that administers the popular (and pricey) English exam TOEFL, the local socially elite who can exclusively afford to buy English or those involved in the local private English institute. Each of these parties has something to gain by propagating certain ideologies about English.

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed, using the story of informant Hyeok-Gyu, how English has come to signify both a practical, necessary survival skill and a set of fantasies about modernity, success, and cosmopolitanism in the local context of Seoul, South Korea. Using Hyeok-Gyu’s narrative as a jumping off point, I discussed how the world of English in Korea can be understood in a more multidimensional way using the lens of socioeconomic class, commodification of education, different forms of capital, and ideology. The next chapter will move on to how English, the language of globalization, is a productive site to look at the potential tensions between globalization and nationalism in South Korea.
Chapter Four: National Identity in a World of Globalization –
the Fantasy of Becoming a Global Citizen at Home

This chapter will examine how English as experienced by Korean college students today is influenced by Korea’s globalization discourse that the state has a vested interest in popularizing. The crux of this chapter will be to explore whether my informants – ‘nationalized’ subjects of the nation-state but also individuals with free agency – saw their English learning as a conflict between globalization and nationalism. Academic discussions on globalization have debated whether globalization will erode the nation-state’s role or whether a global culture and identity will replace the local ethnic and national (e.g. Sassen 2007, Appadurai 1996). How my informants responded to the debate about making English a second official language in Korea will be a productive site to look at this potential conflict. How English learning is embedded in local cosmopolitan fantasies and desires to be global citizens— but physically situated within the local— will be analyzed through a case study of an informant.

Popular Globalization Discourse in South Korea: the Eager March to Become a Global Citizen

Along with its hyper-compressed experience with modernization in the last century (Cho 2000), Korea also had a hyper-compressed encounter with globalization in just the last few decades, when in 1994, President Kim Young Sam formally announced his government’s drive for globalization, or segyehwa, and set up the Globalization Promotion Committee, or GPC. The GPC was headed by the prime minister and consisted of a set of committees on policy planning, administrative reform, educational
reform, and science and technology, and its mission was to increase ‘national competitiveness’ in a rapidly globalizing world (Shin 2003: 10). It is important to note from this history that Korea’s globalization, then, was initiated by the state and continues to be managed by the state, and that it was based on the notion of competitiveness – to be a competitive Korean/global citizen and to be a competitive nation-state.

With Seoul growing more and more globalized and all levels of Korean society demanding English proficiency (in the form of test scores) – from entrance to prestigious high schools or universities to employment and promotion in Korean companies – there has been growing public debate over making English Korea’s second official language. This debate is a site where one can see Korea’s stance towards globalization and nationalism play out. The debate to make English the second language in Korea which started in the late 1990s is ongoing even until today. I asked my informants if English could ever become the second official language in South Korea. If Koreans already spent so much time and money learning English, would it not be easier to just grow up bilingual from birth and have a leg up in the competition? None of my informants agreed with me: one of my informants simply burst into laughter, as if it was an outrageous proposition. Interestingly, there were different reasons that can largely be split into either a practical perspective or an emotional perspective. The pragmatic defense stressed how adopting English as a second language is not a guarantee of national economic and geopolitical enhancement. The emotional defense was based on how putting English at the same level of Korean would be a betrayal against the sacredness of Korean as their sole mother tongue. However, both perspectives were significantly rooted on what informants considered best for Korea. This indicates that despite English education being
intimately tied with the rhetoric of being a global citizen in South Korea, informants still feel strongly connected to their national identity as Koreans.

This is because ultimately the agenda of the Korean nation-state is to produce competitive Koreans who can compete against other foreign nationals. Under the seemingly post-national\textsuperscript{17} rhetoric (e.g. Sassen 2007) of raising cosmopolitan ‘global citizens’ is the desire to produce Koreans who are competitive not for the globe, but for Korea. I conclude that the Korean nation-state’s promotion of English education is ultimately a highly nationalistic agenda that is far from being post-national in nature, which demonstrates why my informants still identify themselves fundamentally as Korean citizens despite years of studying English and growing up with the ‘global citizen’ ideals popularized by the state.

Some key questions I will wrestle with in this chapter, then, are whether the high emphasis on English education in Korea signifies a ‘post-national,’ global education and whether Korea’s education objective is changing in order to raise a global citizen, rather than a Korean one. The crux of the matter is whether the emphasis on English education puts Korea on the road to losing Korean local, ethnic identity. Based on my interviews with Korean college students, the answer was a resounding no. Based on listening to and conversing with my informants, there did not seem to be a conflict between nationalism and globalization in their minds, as globalization itself (and learning English) was seen ultimately as a nationalist goal, even if the immediate beneficiaries of English learning were themselves and they were repeating the state rhetoric of the importance of becoming

\textsuperscript{17} What I mean by post-national is the popular, romantic idea that there will one day be a complete breakdown of national boundaries, making the world a truly borderless, global village.
‘global citizens.’ None of them seriously considered their English pursuit as destruction of their Korean identity or betrayal of Korean national interests, although there was concern about ‘extreme stories’ they have heard in the media or through acquaintances, for example of mothers not letting their young children read Korean storybooks and forcing them to speak English in the house.

The desire to learn English and become ‘global citizens’ was not a blind admiration for all things American (as English is most closely associated with the United States in the minds of South Koreans), as some English-speaking foreigners might think, but a highly ‘Korean’ endeavor managed by the nation-state. I call this ‘Korean’ for the following three reasons (even though this phenomenon is not uniquely Korean and can be applied to other non-English speaking countries as well). First, English is used and experienced in a particular Korean context that makes English simply a pragmatic local ‘skill set’ (for instance, an official English score needed to graduate or get promotions), detached from the neocolonial baggage that English is associated with (full discussion of English’s ties with neocolonialism in South Korea is in Chapter Five). Second, learning English is tied to a particular Korean fantasy that connects English ability with class distinction and cosmopolitanism that confers them prestige in the local setting. Third, learning English – influenced by the state’s popular globalization discourse – is thought of as a patriotic act, improving Korea’s national competitiveness and becoming proud cosmopolitan, globally-oriented (as opposed to being truly post-national with no ethnic/national loyalties) Korean citizens.

18 Here, I am referring to how the English language is intimately politically tied to America’s neo-colonial presence in modern South Korea. Since the U.S.’s intervention in liberating Korea from Japanese rule and the Korean War, it has had a heavy neo-colonial presence militarily, economically, culturally, and politically.
Desire to be Global but in the Local: the Case of Yong-Ju

I met Yong-Ju at a Starbucks near one of the busy exits by Gangnam Station the August of 2010. Located near several popular private English institutions, I could overhear many Korean college students huddled together in small ‘study groups,’ sipping their Americanos or Caramel Macchiatos while sharing test strategies for upcoming English exams. Yong-Ju, a freshman at Korea University (one of the top three universities in the country, based in Seoul) studying business administration, was the epitome of an elite student who has led a relatively privileged and successful academic career in Korea. With black-framed glasses and neatly trimmed (and un-dyed) hair, he was the stereotypical image of an ideal Korean student. At the time I met him, he was in the summer break between the first and second semesters of his freshmen year. He had spent five years in Indonesia when he was little, because his father is in international trade. This is a relatively international background for an average Korean. However, he has never spent any time abroad for studying English purposes.

Despite him having spent some years in infancy abroad, I considered his situation a typical example of a Korean college student who has experienced English entirely in the local setting. He recalls learning English as a fun game in kindergarten in Korea. He started officially learning English in elementary school and started going to private English institutes, which focused on reading skills and grammar. He attended Han-Il High School (a highly selective high school) before he attended Korea University. This is a rather elite path in the local Korean educational system. He can be considered a ‘winner’ of the local educational system, so overall he appeared to me less critical of the current status quo of Korea’s education system.
Yong-Ju said he attended Minsa High School’s (one of the top high schools in the country, unique in that the campus is 100 percentage English-speaking) summer English camp during middle school. He said he “improved a lot” during that camp experience. It is significant that he gages this increase in English ability by his test score improvement in TOEFL (this score needed to make the cut for the competitive entrance to Hal-Il High School). Yong-Ju was overall openly eager to improve his English. He showed open admiration for native-like pronunciation and conversational skills. He attended Hackers private institution (one of the most profitable private English institutions by Gangnam station), but he thought his ‘real’ English speaking abilities were not improving through Hackers. He started doing private tutoring with So-Ra, mentioned in Chapter Three, during which they practice speaking on random debate topics.

It is significant to note that despite Yong-Ju being one of the academically successful students in the local context, he has always felt that his English remains inadequate, to the extent that he sought out a private tutor to practice speaking English. Despite having high English test scores demanded by Korean schools and companies, the fact that he cannot speak English fluently with foreigners makes him feel that his English is still poor. What does it mean to be good in English in Korea, then? To my informants, it is felt as an impossible – but hopefully one-day achievable – ideal, a fantasy to become like ‘native speakers.’ (Informants would casually refer to this as the ne-i-ti-beu pronunciation and fluency.) Although this appears as a contradiction, my informants, despite feeling like English is a difficult language, had the ‘naïve,’ sincere hope that if they keep trying hard enough, they could one day become ne-i-ti-beu. The fact that Koreans do not feel comfortable with their English abilities unless they are like ‘native
speakers’ is highly significant. I saw many self-help English textbooks in stores advertise themselves as providing the fast, effective ways to sound like a ne-i-ti-beu. The feelings of discomfort with English and foreigners, even to those like Yong-Ju who are the local elite, indicate that despite years of English learning, my informants still feel like English is a foreign language and consider English-speaking foreigners the ‘Others.’

Yong-Ju said his major requires him to take two mandatory English courses called “Practical English” and “Management English.” He said next semester (second semester of freshmen year) he will be taking his first course taught in English (I will refer to these as CTE, Course Taught in English) called “Introduction to Accounting.” When I asked if he was concerned about taking such an important, fundamental course in English, he said he indeed was and was preparing beforehand by watching online accounting courses in Korean (ingang) over the summer. He said one-third of his classmates are like him and prepare for CTEs. He said CTEs are graded on a different scale than normal Korea University courses to account for the difficulty of taking courses in a foreign language (for example, first having to translate before understanding the concept).

CTEs are an interesting phenomenon in the Korean university setting. For instance, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), the Korean equivalent of MIT or Caltech of the United States, teaches all its courses in English. More and more schools are boasting how many of their courses are taught in English. If well-educated students like Yong-Ju had to prepare for a course even before it started, this shows that most Korean students are not comfortable enough with a foreign language to actually take lectures in that language. Then why are universities implementing such policies that come as a burden to students like Yong-Ju? Yong-Ju said that college
students have mixed reactions to their schools’ CTE policies, some resistant because it forces them to spend extra time translating textbooks and lectures and others more receptive because it shows how global-orientated their alma mater is. The popularity of CTEs demonstrates that the popular globalization discourse has deeply influenced college education practices and is spreading the ideology to college students that being proficient in English and being a global citizen is something to strive for. The popular globalization discourse in Korea propagates the idea that globalization is beneficial for Korea’s national competitiveness in the global scene and that being a ‘global citizen’ can help individuals be competitive in the local hypercompetitive context.

Universities are racing to market themselves as globally competitive, able to produce ‘global-minded’ college graduates that companies are looking for and contribute to Korea’s success on the global stage. Discourse about globalization and national competitiveness that dominate English education in South Korea originates not only from the state, but also from Korean universities where students like Yong-Ju internalize the importance of English and take-for-granted that English is a must, not a choice. As more and more elite students flock to universities in the U.S., Korean universities face the challenge to market their programs as global. These kinds of strategies are material, in that it is about survival (getting enough students to attend their college and pay tuitions), and also ideological, deeply influenced by the state’s popular globalization discourse.

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported in February 2011 that although only seven percent of South Korea’s full-time university faculty members are foreign, the figure is up threefold in less than a decade, according to Korea’s Ministry of
Education, Science, and Technology. This already puts Korea well ahead of neighboring Japan’s five percent, despite a much longer history of foreign hires in Japan. The Korean government’s “World Class University Project,” which received 825 billion won ($752 million) last year, has fueled the process, pushing colleges to hire foreign faculty.

Korean universities are competing to market themselves as more ‘global’ (which in many cases, simply means more English-speaking) than others to stay competitive in a world where top Korean talent is flocking to the United States for higher education, by mandating, for instance, its faculty to teach courses in English even if there is no urgent need to do so. In following this trend, the article cites how Sogang University, one of the top universities in Korea, is striving to push English-language teaching from 20 percent of its classes to 50 percent.

The article discusses how in the last five years, South Korea’s two top science colleges, the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, known as KAIST, and the Pohang University of Science and Technology, called Postech, have brought in hundreds of American and European professors and switched to all-English campuses in “shock-treatment programs designed to propel the two institutions into the academic big league.” However, when at Postech’s matriculation ceremony last year, all speeches, including the president’s opening talk and the freshman oath, were made in English, many parents did not understand a word; university officials justified their decision by arguing “this was the right way to go to become a top global university.” (A popular

19 The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2/27/2011 “South Korea Brings in Foreign Faculty by the Thousands, but Is It Ready for Them?”)
television documentary show “60 Minutes Investigation” also showcased the problems about going ‘all-English’ on KAIST’s campus in October 2009.) The article describes that another set of problems rise from Korean university’s unpreparedness to fully incorporate and accommodate the new foreign faculty, despite its enthusiastic and ambitious hiring of such foreigners.

Korean universities are dynamically changing to survive against Western competitors, often too zealously and rashly changing to keep pace with globalization. As curriculums of universities change, young South Korean college students receiving such new forms of education will also be influenced in various ways. How English is incorporated into this ambitious agenda of Korean universities (and what effect that is having on Korean college students) is another intriguing direction for future research.

When I asked if there was communication difficulty between professor and students in CTEs (Yong-Ju has not taken a CTE yet), he said he does not think so. It is significant to note that this is only his personal perception, and not necessarily the reality. The fact that he tells me there is little to no communication difficulty in CTEs hints at his attempt to justify and advocate his university’s policies. He seemed proud of the fact that Korea University invested a lot of money in the Business Administration department (as in hiring top Korean faculty who have gained their PhDs from abroad, namely in the United States). He seemed optimistic of the fact that his department faculty members are fluent enough in English to conduct classes in English, and that it was mainly the students’ responsibility to understand the lectures. Yong-Ju was a prime example of a student who has internalized the popular globalization discourse and was eager to improve his English and become a cosmopolitan, global citizen. It is significant to once again understand
Yong-Ju’s positionality as a local elite. Although I am not familiar with Yong-Ju’s exact socio-economic background, in the local context of South Korea that highly values educational achievements, his status as a soon-to-be graduate of Korea University largely guarantees him a spot in the future social elite of South Korea. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the state’s popular globalization discourse serves the ruling class ideology of South Korea; it is in the interest of the educational elite (who already have high English test scores and is a ‘winner’ in the English-dominated local education system, for example) that the status quo remain as it is, and this could be a reason why students like Yong-Ju would be highly receptive to internalize the ideology that English is indeed an important language and that being a English-proficient global citizen is beneficial for individuals and for the nation-state.

One of Yong-Ju’s dream careers is becoming a professor in a Seoul-based University (all top universities in Korea are based in Seoul), but he said that if he did his graduate work in Korea University, ironically he would never become a professor at Korea University. Most Seoul-based top universities much preferred foreign-educated faculty, so he felt that English was important in his ultimately going abroad to earn his PhD. This shows how the popular globalization discourse is both a fantasy and a reality. It is a fantasy that improving one’s English and receiving education in English-speaking countries will make one a cosmopolitan ‘global citizen.’ But it becomes a reality when Korean society as a whole does believe in that fantasy and actually gives those who claim to be English-speaking global citizens higher status and privilege.

However, despite his acknowledgment of the importance of English ability and American academic degrees in Korea, Yong-Ju disagreed that English should become the
second official language in Korea. He said that it was unnecessary for all Koreans to speak English and that the cost of implementing such a policy would much outweigh the benefits. Although Yong-Ju’s statement is true – most Koreans have no day-to-day interaction with English-speaking foreigners – I could not help but notice the elitist implications of this statement, which supposes that average laborers working at small restaurants or supermarkets will not need English, while those like himself should strive to become ‘native’-like English speakers. He pointed to India and Japan; India made English one of its official languages, while Japan did not, but the economic performance of Japan outpaces India’s, he said. Although this economic performance difference is the result of many historical and structural differences between these two nations that have little to do with English, Yong-Ju used this example to make his point about whether to adopt English as a second official language in South Korea. It is important to note that his argument was not based on emotional patriotism, but matter-of-fact pragmatism. Although he used unsubstantiated evidence for his reasoning, his logic of rejecting English as an official language was based on pragmatism. However, the core of his reasoning was still based on what was best for Korea, the nation-state he feels that he belongs to and still firmly attaches himself to. Even though Yong-Ju wanted to go abroad to receive his PhD, his ultimate goal is to return to Korea and teach at a prestigious university in Seoul. Despite his cosmopolitan, global aspirations, he is still firmly a local agent, who is bounded by his loyalties to his nation-state.

Resolving the Tension Between Globalization and Nationalism

Although Korea today is a leader in globalization – easily seen from transnational business strategies of top Korean firms to the growingly international domestic
demographics – scholars of Korea’s globalization have argued that this extensive globalization has not weakened or removed Korean nationalism (Shin 2003, Kim 2000). For instance, Shin cites the recent World Cup fever of 2002, when Korea co-hosted the games with Japan and awed the world with months of street cheering and nation-wide patriotic celebrations. Samuel Kim also argues that “despite the rising globalization and globalism chorus, deep down Korea remains mired in the cocoon of exclusive cultural nationalism, [which] acts as a powerful and persistent constraint on the segyehwa drive” (2000: 263, 275). In Kim’s view, “no fundamental learning – no paradigm shift – has occurred in the course of Korea’s segyehwa drive, only situation-specific tactical adaptation” (2000: 275). Shin agrees with Kim that indeed no paradigm shift has occurred and that Koreans still “appropriate globalization as a nationalist goal” (2003: 6). However, Shin argues that Koreans see “no inherent contradiction between nationalism and globalization,” since Koreans initiated and pursued globalization with a nationalistic agenda from the outset. This is how Shin explains Korea’s curious mixture of two seemingly contradictory forces, nationalism and globalization; he argues that this ‘paradox’ of globalization is not so much a paradox in Korea as nationalism and globalization can peacefully co-exist, spurring each other on.

Recent academic discussions on globalization have debated whether globalization will erode the nation-state’s role or whether a global culture and identity will replace the local ethnic and national (e.g. Sassen 2007, Appadurai 1996). Shin takes the side that in Korea’s case, nationalism and globalization cannot be separated because of the “interactive nature of this relationship”; looking at Korea’s nationalist appropriation of
globalization, and the intensification of ethnic identity in reaction to globalization process, he argues that such contradictory forces can continue to coexist in Korea (2003: 8).

A nation state not only reacts to the harmful effects of globalization but also becomes proactive in maximizing what globalization has to offer…where globalization is viewed as a new form of dominance and threat, organic, ethnic, collectivist notions of nation and society are likely to emerge, which in turn promote a nationalist appropriation of globalization. (Shin 2003: 8-9)

In light of Korea’s modern history, from becoming a Japanese colony to turning into a battleground of Cold War politics, the traumas of being a ‘weak’ country has shaped Korea’s nationalist attitude towards globalization. Then, looking at Korean government’s active encouragement of English education, I argue that Korea’s approach to English education is not an abandoning of nationalism, but as Shin argues, a nationalist appropriation of globalization. This explains the ‘paradoxical’ approach my informants have towards English, where they strive to master it, but also resist it being another official language equal in status to Korean. The desire to learn English is not a blind admiration for all things American, as some uninformed and uncritical observers of Korea may think, but an individually practical and collectively nationalistic endeavor.

My informants’ resistance against making English a second official language of Korea and the nationalistic rhetoric in the defense of English education demonstrate how individuals are taught to believe in the uniqueness of their ‘nation,’ and come to identify themselves with the nation itself (Anderson 1991, Balibar 1991). Koreans see themselves as uniquely Korean vis-à-vis the ‘Others.’ That the Korean language is sacred, that the Korean nation must be protected at all costs, that Korea cannot lose its ‘national identity’ are ideas that informants have talked about in talking about Korea’s experience with English. Balibar argues that the ‘illusion’ of national identity occurs when ideologies of
nation lead individuals to believe in an imagined unity with the ‘nation,’ an invented concept that has been applied retrospectively to create an imaginary, mythical national origin (1991). Societies are nationalized by individuals internalizing the ideologies of nation and willingly identifying themselves as ‘citizens.’ This imaginary relationship an individual has with the nation is the basis of the ideology that produces individuals into national subjects. A key part of this imaginary relationship with the nation is the component of language: Balibar argues that the mother tongue becomes “the metaphor for the love fellow nationals feel for one another” (1991). Ideologies of ‘fictive ethnicity’ teach individuals from a young age to respect their mother tongue and accept that their ability to speak that language marks them as fundamentally unique and different from the ‘Others’ (Balibar 1991). Indeed, my informants considered their mother tongue of Korean a unique, sacred language that sets them apart from the rest of the world and despite the potential practicality of making English a second official language, my informants were firmly against such a proposal.

Shin also argues that globalization can actually promote ethnic/national consciousness and identity because “they provide opportunities to rediscover one’s own culture and identity by offering comparative references” (2003: 10). For instance, he explains, traveling overseas or using the Internet “can enhance one’s cultural consciousness and allow one to compare ‘us’ and ‘them.’” I argue that this logic can be a useful tool to understand how English education can actually increase ethnic consciousness. The difficulty, or the sense of impossibility my informants feel, in mastering English makes my informants acutely feel their difference from the ‘Other.’ Even if this manifests in negative ways, such as an inferiority complex towards native
speakers of English or embarrassment about ‘Konglish,’ or positive ways, such as more appreciation for one’s own fluency in Korean and pride in one’s unique Korean identity, English education can actually strengthen the Korean identity vis-à-vis the American, for instance.

On top of the obvious pragmatic motivation to learn English as a skill set in the local hypercompetitive context, an important question to ponder is whether Koreans learn English because it is beneficial for Korea’s national competitiveness (‘nationalist’) or because they aspire to be ‘post-national’ global citizens (‘globalist’). The answer is that it is not an either/or, but that nationalism and globalization can co-exist. When my informants explained Korea’s situation with English, they were clearly influenced by the state’s rhetoric of tying English proficiency to Korea’s national competitiveness in the global stage. For instance, another informant Ji-Won, a English major at one of the top women’s universities in Seoul, casually remarked that if Koreans all became good in English, Korea could catch up to America. However, my informants’ desire to learn and master English also had non-nationalistic reasons; many of them talked about how English would allow them to befriend foreigners easily and be more cultured in foreign affairs. Their comments show a desire to be ‘beyond’ the nation-state of Korea and a fantasy of being cosmopolitan. Ji-Won, for instance, said that she did not want to be a “frog in a small pond,” which in Korean refers to being trapped in an environment that is not conducive to growth and seeing the big picture. Whether or not this desire and fantasy are the results of indoctrination from the state’s deliberate effort to popularize globalization, my informants experienced English in a way that did not embody an
irreconcilable conflict between the seemingly oppositional forces of nationalism and ‘post-national’ globalization.

My informants imagined that through learning English they can acquire the cosmopolitanism and global-mindedness that has such cachet in Korean society today, although they are firmly situated and located in the local setting, with little to no prospects of ever using English or interacting with foreigners on a regular basis. Imagining and fantasy of cosmopolitanism is central to their flexible attitude towards globalization and nationalism. Arjun Appadurai (1996) argued that the “work of imagination” is a “constitutive feature of modern subjectivity.” Appadurai allows us to think about the role of local agency and imagination in creating new interpretations of global messages and forces. Appadurai questions the popular belief that globalization will lead to an emergence of a homogenous global culture disseminated from the center to the periphery; he is unsure if existing center-periphery models can address the complexity and irregularity in today’s globalizing world. How are globally circulated forms of culture, such as English, worked into local practices through the active imagination of local individuals and groups? How my informants creatively accommodate the potential conflict between nationalism and globalization in their English learning indicates to us the possibility of a local construction of the global, rather than a single, coherent global culture available throughout the world. My informants’ flexible attitude towards the place of English in South Korea shows us that we can move beyond traditional oppositions between tradition and modernity, or global and local, for example by claiming that modernity and global messages are experienced differently over space and throughout time in locally mediated ways.
What is important to note is that although my informants wanted to appropriate English skills and some desired to study abroad in America in the near future, most of them did not picture themselves ever living permanently abroad. Despite the fantasy of being a cosmopolitan global citizen, there was still a firm desire to be ‘at home,’ comfortably interacting with other like-minded (and similar-looking) Koreans and speaking Korean. This shows that national identity and post-national globalization indeed coexists in my informants’ discourse about English education, but that the first, stronger identification is still within the boundaries of the nation-state.

The informants of my ethnographic study were flexible in how they imagined and negotiated their identity vis-à-vis English and the world beyond Korea. While they were firmly bounded by the power of the nation-state, identifying themselves as Korean nationals and exhibiting nationalistic sentiments, they also simultaneously viewed themselves as global citizens with cosmopolitan aspirations. As classical nation-state models start to unravel from modern communications and nomadism, Aihwa Ong (1996) argued that flexibility is what characterizes the nation-state and individuals in how they deal with the globalizing world today. She develops the concept of “flexible citizenship” to refer to how subjects can respond “fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions,” with governments also reacting creatively and responsively to the challenges of transnationality (1999: 6). Ong describes that Asian tiger states, such as South Korea, have “evolved by aggressively seeking global capital while securing their own economic interests and the regulation of their populations,” referring this to a “postdevelopmental state strategy” (1999: 21). Under this framework, she argues that there is a new mode of constructing identity, one that can escape localization by state
authorities, but also remain bounded by disciplining state power. The “realignment of political, ethnic and personal identities is not necessarily a process of ‘win or lose,’ whereby political borders become ‘insignificant’ and the nation-state ‘loses’ to global trade in terms of its control over the affiliations and behavior of its subjects,” but a more dynamic, fluid process that each party responses to in a flexible way (1999: 2-3). As Ong describes, I argue that South Korea is a postdevelopmental state that is flexibly appropriating globalization for its own purposes. English learning has been actively incorporated into the nation-state’s globalization campaign and this state-initiated campaign is not meant to weaken the state’s position vis-a-vis ‘more powerful’ nation-states like the United States or global capitalism, but to use globalization for nationalistic purposes (‘let’s make Korea strong in the world’) and to produce nationalistic yet globally-competitive citizens.

**Connections to Existing Scholarly Research on Korea’s Globalization**

Other anthropological studies on English in Korea confirm my findings with Korean college students. For instance, Park and Abelmann’s (2004) look at Korean mothers’ management of English education shows that the mothers’ cosmopolitan ambitions (i.e., to be global) in relation to English education does not conflict with nationalism. The authors look at scholars who refer to ‘discrepant cosmopolitanisms’ in order to wrest cosmopolitanism from its classical Western philosophical articulation. The classic construct includes the humanist idea of universalistic identifications, or a detachment from restrictive forms of identity. Critiques of the traditional definition has “an appreciation of diverse, and specifically non-elite, modes of cosmopolitan strivings,” such as “the cosmopolitan strivings of seemingly ‘local’ people and even of ‘nationalistic’
rhetorical regimes themselves” (2004: 647). The authors argue that despite these mothers’ cosmopolitan strivings through English education management, this escalating global value of English should not mask appreciation of people’s desire to be ‘at home’ in the world.

The fact that my informants expressed no internal turmoil over the ‘paradox’ or contradiction between globalization and nationalism also manifests in how they use English in their daily repertoire. Lee (2006), when she looked at the use of English in television commercials, saw a creative use of English to tailor to local tastes. For instance, the tagline for an Olympus Camera was “Eye want.” Lee notes “neither An eye wants nor Eyes want as would be expected in Standard English” is used, instead playing on the homophonic I want. Lee is referring to the emergence of ‘postcolonial,’ postmodern, global Englishes that have been celebrated for being positive expressions of hybridity (Kachru 1986).

This type of word play is certainly constructed for and will be appreciated more by Korean-English bilinguals than by English monolinguals. English monolinguals might not be able to ignore what they perceive as grammatical mistakes regarding the use of articles and morphemes and thus might not value the pun I/Eye want. (Lee 2006: 82).

Lee argues that Korean-English bilinguals express their linguistic dexterity and creativity through “hybridization and localization” (2006: 87) This new hybridity allows younger generations in South Korea “to enter globalized discourses about technology, pop culture, and gender through English, while enabling them to stay rooted in their ethnolinguistic histories through Korean. For modern Koreans, linguistic hybridity – code-mixing in English – resolves the tension between global (i.e., dominant English and American culture) and local practices” (2006: 87).
So although the Korean media or daily conversations are saturated with English words and phrases, this does not pose a direct conflict with the local Korean identity.

No doubt, English is an indispensable part of the modern Korean experience today and despite the problems with English education, it is highly unlikely that Korea will abandon its road to English mastery, especially in the context of a rapidly globalizing world. However, this effort to master English cannot be read as an abandoning of Korean identity, because in the context of South Korea, globalization is to some degree a state-managed nationalistic endeavor. Likewise, the goal of English education is not to be a nation-less global citizen, but to be a modern, cosmopolitan, global-minded Korean citizen who can use English to survive not only in Korea but make Korea survive in the world.
Chapter Five “English and Power in the ‘Post-colonial’ space of South Korea: Anxieties of a ‘Small’ Nation”

This chapter will look at how Koreans experience English today in a certain historically and globally-situated context, particularly focusing on South Korea’s history of colonialism and its current ‘post-colonial’/‘neo-colonial’ status. The history of ‘colonialism’ in South Korea can be traced all the way back from Korea’s tributary status vis-à-vis China in the pre-modern period, formal colony state to the Japanese Empire during the early half of the twentieth century, to the militarily, economically, geopolitically, and culturally dependent relationship with the United States today. I will first look at scholarly discussions about how English can be seen as a tool of linguistic and cultural imperialism to show how a seemingly politically neutral and innocent thing like language is intimately connected to larger forces like colonialism.

Through a discussion of an interview with a college professor teaching English education at Seoul National University, which is unquestioningly accepted by Koreans as the flagship public university in South Korea, I will discuss how local actors see Korea’s relationship with English in a larger global context, particularly informed by how they see Korea’s national status vis-à-vis other ‘more powerful’ nation-states. How English is a site where anxieties about South Korea being a vulnerable, threatened nation-state reveal themselves and how these anxieties inform informants’ experience with English will be explored.
The Scholarly Debate Surrounding What the Global Spread of English Really Means

What does the global spread of English mean? What is there to worry or fear about the fact that people all over the world are learning English? Is it not convenient when people can communicate over a single language? What is so problematic about people all over the world voluntarily choosing to learn English and adopting American culture? Specifically related to this thesis, is there anything wrong with Koreans so enthusiastically and ‘obsessively’ learning English?

The global spread of English has been thought of in the academic community in multiple ways. One camp holds the perspective that the expansion of English is more or less politically neutral (e.g. Crystal 1997). Such positive, celebratory accounts of the global spread of English claim that, while the global spread of English has its first roots in the history of colonialism, the imperialistic meaning of English is now erased from the language and English is now adopted by people around the world as a neutral tool to freely choose as useful means for accessing education, cultural products, and the international society. Along with such accounts, some scholars have embraced the idea of World Englishes, believing that new varieties of English are equally significant as the traditionally accepted norms such as British or American English, celebrating the creativity, uniqueness, and vitality of new Englishes and arguing that the traditional ‘ownership’ of English be challenged (e.g. Kachru 1986).

However, another camp of scholars, such as Pennycook (1995) and Phillipson (1992), argued that while having a global language of English for international communication and local languages for the expression and preservation of identity and
community appears perfect and seems to take the best of both worlds, it is actually highly problematic because English ends up being placed in a privileged position, while local languages are thought to be backward, useless and irrelevant, making the global spread of English an intimately political process that promotes unequal power differentials among various nation-states. Pennycook questions the widespread assumption that the spread of English is good, natural, useful, and/or voluntary and proposes more critical views on the global spread of English, such as arguing that it is a language of West imperialism and of particular local class interests in the colonial and neo-colonial contexts. The dominance of English in domains of business, popular culture, and international academic relations is read as part of a deliberate governmental or institutional agenda in English-speaking countries to promote the worldwide use of English for economic and political purposes (Pennycook 1995). Pennycook argues that people learning English, however, are not “passive consumers of hegemonic cultural forms,” arguing for a critical paradigm that “acknowledges human agency” and examines the “effects of the spread of English, how people take up English in their daily lives” (1995:48). Both self-subjugation and a struggle to oppose the center’s claim to control over meaning are present in this human agency. Phillipson (1992) proposes the idea of linguistic imperialism, stating that the world dominance of English is deliberately promoted and maintained through institutional structures such as the academic establishment and the British Council that promote the belief about English being a superior language. Many scholars in this camp lament that the rise of English as a global language is a threat to the survival of local languages and the self-determination of local

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20 In Thomas Macaulay’s infamous memorandum *Minute on English Education* on the topic of how best to educate the Indian people during the British colonial rule, one can see how English is privileged over the local languages as being superior carriers of knowledge, civilization, and modernization.
peoples. About 75 percentage of the top 100 universities listed by *Newsweek* are located in countries that has English as the first language of communication and the overwhelming majority of top academic journals or Internet-driven content are in English, making English the common language in a knowledge-based global economy (Jeon 2006). This gives many English-speaking parties the economic and political motivation to maintain and promote English’s supreme status.

Both camps are useful frameworks to think about English in Korea. I believe we must question the traditional idea of center/periphery or the notion that there is a fundamental connection between a language and a people’s identity, giving much consideration to how individuals negotiate English in local socio-cultural contexts. We must resist oversimplification and appreciate the complexity of the issue at hand. Through this lens, I propose how we can start to understand the complex dynamics of power and agency in the English-infiltrated local context of Seoul, South Korea.

*Is the Global Spread of English Just About Language?: English and American Imperialism*

What such debates reveal is the fact that the spread of a specific language is not simply about that language. South Korea’s relationship with the English language is linked to a larger geo-political picture than simply the realm of language and in the case of South Korea, it speaks to Korea’s general relationship to the United States, the country that brought the English language to the Korean peninsula in the first place and was actively part of the historical process that made English such an important language in ‘post-colonial’ South Korea.
Scholars such as Yoshimi (2003) and Chen (2010) have explored Asia’s complex relationship to America, particularly in the post-Second World War/Cold War era, which fundamentally shaped Asian countries’ current relationship to the United States. Yoshimi argue that America has had “a uniquely strong and significant presence” in countries like South Korea and described how America in the ‘post-colonial’ period has took over the place of Japan as a ‘colonial’ power to Korea, pointing out the continuity of colonial consciousness and practice in areas once under Japanese colonial rule (2003:433-435). America was first embraced wholeheartedly by the Korean peninsula as the liberator from the much-hated Japanese colonial rule and next by South Korea in the post-Korean War (1950-1953) because it was the embodiment of ‘anti-communism’ vis-à-vis enemy North Korea. During that period, Americanism and anti-communism functioned as a kind of ‘civil religion’ (Yoshimi 2003).

In discussing Asia’s history with the United States, Chen argues that criticism of the U.S. neocolonial hegemony was taboo in Cold War era South Korea; otherwise one would be branded a Communist and risk destroying one’s life and family (2010:136). The image of America as a powerful, civilized, wealthy nation was deeply solidified, and the goal of former Japanese colonies like Taiwan and South Korea was to Americanize, modeling their modernizing projects after the U.S. (without critical reflection on the consequences) and sending the best students to learn in the U.S and think like Americans. Chen argues that in places like Taiwan and South Korea:

“the effects of the cold war have become embedded in local history, and simply pronouncing the war to be over will not cause them to dissolve. The complex effects of the war, mediated through our bodies, have been inscribed into our national, family, and personal histories. In short, the cold war is still alive within
us…Our worldview, political and institutional forms, and systems of popular knowledge have been deeply shaped by the cold war structure” (2010: 118-119).

The Cold War was declared over, so that it could ideologically pave the way for American-led globalization, but Chen argues that Cold War structures in Asia have not been fully dismantled, citing North and South Korea’s division and the continuing presence of American troops in South Korea as examples. He argues for the need to “de-cold war” and “de-Americanize” in order for a critical self-reflection about the role Cold War and the United States still plays in the formation of Asian subjectivities even today (2010: 120).

The high level of pro-Americanism in the immediate post-Second World War and the Cold War era in South Korea has changed over time, at some points the pendulum shifting all the way to the point of anti-Americanism. A 2004 report by the Rand Corporation “Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.” described the ups and downs of South Korea’s attitudes towards the United States since the end of World War II. It focuses on the sharp negative turn in attitudes towards the United States that took place around the year 2002 when a South Korean speed skater lost the Olympic gold medal to an American and when two U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea whose armored vehicle accidentally killed two South Korean schoolgirls were acquitted. (More events have happened since then, including the widespread candle demonstrations against importing U.S. beef in 2008.) Although this report is not a comprehensive history of South Korea-U.S. relations, a topic relevant but much beyond the scope of this thesis, it provides a glimpse of how geo-political relations between the countries are changing over time. However, anti-Americanism at certain points in South
Korean modern history does not amount to complete independence from the grip of America; Yoshimi cites Mung (2001) who insightfully pointed out that:

“in reality, both anti-Americanism and pro-Americanism have basically amounted to the same thing in South Korean society, in so far as they both reflect a dependency on America. Extreme yearning and extreme hatred both derive from a subordination of the self to the other. There can be no escape from ‘America-centeredness’ so long as we continue to think that all problems will be solved just by defeating America” (Yoshimi 2003: 445).

Thus even at points of seeming anti-Americanism, South Koreans subconsciously place themselves within the sphere of American hegemony and is not free from the reality and fantasy of ‘America.’ In conclusion, the spread of English in South Korea today is fundamentally intertwined with Korea’s ally/dependent status with the U.S. militarily, economically, culturally and geopolitically. English as an object of fetishistic desire for South Koreans today is fundamentally linked to how ‘America’ has become deeply embedded in the consciousness of the South Koreans as an object of dependency and desire. This is not unique to Korea: American culture and the ‘American Dream’ is the U.S.’s number-one export all over the world (Barnet and Cavanaugh 1995). “In the years of the American Century, the power, wealth, luxury, and the sense of possibility and personal freedom symbolized by the United States and reflected in its music, video, and film products fascinated people all over the world – even where American culture was officially denounced as decadent, subversive, or silly” (1995: 36).

Scholars such as Yoshimi and Chen motivate us think about the historical baggage that something seemingly innocent as foreign language studies carries; English learning in South Korea today is profoundly linked to Korea’s relationship with the
United States and American neo-colonial hegemony in the world today that propagates neoliberal capitalism and democratic ideals that privilege America over other countries. As Chen points out, a critical reflection about this historical baggage is needed for countries like South Korea to take steps to truly “de-cold war” and “de-Americanize” itself, and this thesis will attempt to do what Chen proposes for scholars studying contemporary Asia.

**Local Intellectual Voices About the Infiltration of English in South Korea**

There are already such self-reflective efforts to “de-cold war” and “de-Americanize” in South Korea by local intellectuals. *English, Colonialism of My Mind* (Yoon, ed. 2007) is a Korean-language text that published many South Korean intellectuals’ essays on how English functions as a kind of colonialism in Korea today. The book is a collection of essays from professors of departments ranging from English Literature, English Education, Sociolinguistics, to Sociology. The book showcases how local intellectuals in South Korea have responded to the influx of English in various critical ways. As the title of the book highlights, the text discusses how Koreans feel colonized by the language of English despite being citizens of a ‘free’ country.

The intellectuals refer to Frantz Fanon’s well-known text *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952), which discusses Martinique’s continuing self-colonizing vis-à-vis former colonizer France in the ‘post-colonial’ era, or Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1997) and Chinua Achebe’s (1975) famous debate surrounding the status of English in African literature, in order to make sense of the local situation. Such comparative efforts show effort to critically think about Korea’s relationship to English (and America) and place Korea’s
situation in a larger historical and global context. Yoon, editor and one of the contributors of the book, confesses that although he earns a living teaching English at the university level, he is still deeply disturbed by the extreme rise of English and that he, too, is not free from the inferiority complex towards English native speakers. To him, English is both a language that he resists and obeys. He ends his concluding essay to the book by describing how the title of Fanon’s work *Black Skin, White Masks* was once translated into Korean as *Those Who Have been Exiled in Their Own Land* in the late 1970s. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* discusses how individuals labeled ‘black’ feel in a world steeped in ideologies of race. White men consider themselves superior to black men, while black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, their equality. The inferiority complex is internalized (or “epidermalized”) by black men and for the black man, “however painful it may be for [Fanon] to accept,” there is only one destiny, “and it is white.” The more the black man can adopt the white man’s language and culture – in Fanon’s case, French – the less inferior he feels vis-à-vis the white man. Ideology is at work here when black men feel the need to learn and master French, the language of the oppressors, in order to feel equal and human. Similarly, why do Koreans feel their English is never good enough? Why do they consider the native, ‘accent-less’ American English to be the best (Lippi-Green 1997)? Yoon argues that the translated title helps us understand how Koreans, too, have been exiled from their own land when they ‘voluntarily’ self-colonize themselves to English and America. Although there is no easy solution offered by the authors to the ‘problem,’ their insightful commentary on the state of English in South Korea points to signs of resistance and critical self-reflection, the kind of effort that Chen hopes Asia does to “de-cold war” and “de-Americanize” itself.
In contrast to the highly academic tone of the above text, *If Korean Disappears: Year 2023, A Trip to English Colony South Korea* (Shi and Jung 2003) is a futuristic fictional novel, most likely targeting average Koreans, predicting a future in South Korea where Korean disappears and English becomes the only surviving language. Although this is a text predicting potential future events, it is based on trends that are already happening in Korea. For instance, most of the events that the authors predict are based on current news articles about English or past news articles on Korea’s colonial experience with the Japanese language. This book, written in a highly readable fashion, was designed to reach a wider, non-academic audience, so that more Koreans are aware of what is happening in Korea. This text’s ‘pessimistic’ prediction of Korea’s future (the book is dedicated to “the sad mother tongue”) shows the anxieties and fears Koreans feel towards the spread of English and the possible negative effects English is having on Korea’s local language.

Finally, *The Delusion to Make English as an Official Language: Ethnic Culture is Competitiveness* (Cho 2001) is a classic academic text in the South Korean history of public debate surrounding English. In the final years of the twentieth century, when there were many Koreans arguing for the usefulness of adopting English as an official language in a world of globalization, the author wrote a scathing criticism of such facile solutions to globalization. As a Professor of Korean and Korean Literature, he presents a case for why Koreans should protect the Korean language and promote the advancement of local culture and academics. He argues that ‘ethnic culture’ is true competitiveness in the world of globalization. He questions why globalization must necessarily equal Englishization of the world. He does not argue that Koreans should not study English; he
rather argues that Koreans should not be slaves to English, but be masters of English who can appropriate English’s usefulness for Korea’s benefit.

To sum up, such local voices demonstrate that although it appears that Korea as a whole is blindly and unquestioningly enthusiastic towards English learning, there are efforts to critically examine English’s status in South Korea. On the other hand, Korean texts such as this, which are not yet translated into English and reaching only the local Korean-speaking audience, suggest that despite the critical attitudes towards English in this text, English is still ironically the necessary tool to reach a wider audience and make this text more ‘effective.’

**Raising the Future English Teachers of Korea: Interview with a University Professor of English Education**

To more fully understand my main informants – college (or college-aged) students in Seoul – I wanted to talk to university professors to hear what their opinions were about the English boom among their students and how their university was dealing with English instruction. During my three week stay in Seoul, I was fortunate enough to get in touch with a professor of English education at Seoul National University (SNU), a school customarily accepted by all Koreans to be the best in their country. Professor Byung Min Lee had been publicly interviewed about the status of English at universities in a previous television documentary I had seen (which largely showcased the ‘disturbing’ trend of CTEs in Korean universities, see Chapter Four for my discussion on CTEs) and was one of the contributors to the book *English, Colonialism of My Mind* (Yoon ed. 2007). I was eager to interview a leading local intellectual voice on the status of English
and particularly intrigued because he is a professor who is teaching college students who will soon become the English teachers of South Korea.

“Is it not strange that a Korean professor teaching Korean students needs to do so in English” asked Lee rhetorically in a mocking tone. “90 percentage of university professors at SNU got their PhD’s abroad,” said Lee, “but English is still a foreign language to us, so of course most of us are not capable of teaching in English!” Because of the nature of his department, he naturally teaches English education courses in English, but he argued that departments should individually decide whether or not instruction needs to necessarily happen in English. Lee said it made sense for several departments – like the natural sciences or engineering – to teach in English since the language of choice globally in certain disciplines is English. He added that choosing to teach in English based on the discipline’s needs is wise and acceptable, since a country like France who has high pride in its mother tongue also accepts English as the common language for certain departments. However, he critiqued university policy of demanding professors to teach in English blindly following the administration’s agenda of being ‘global,’ when there is no clear reason to do so and it could negatively impact the quality of instruction and communication in the classroom.

Lee pointed out that less than five to ten percent of Korea’s population would actually need to have English proficiency for their careers, so there is nation-wide waste of time and money when everyone is trying to learn English. Referring to his own students, the future English teachers of Korea, he said that younger generations on average are indeed superior in English ability, more influenced by American culture from an earlier age and in a more intense manner, and have more exposure to the world
through travelling or studying abroad. However, he pointed out that it is still difficult to find many Koreans who feel comfortable with English or can use English well enough in actual situations. “You would have to be at least at my English proficiency to use it usefully,” said Lee, “and I’ve studied English for decades and still study English everyday!” Lee confessed that he knows how difficult and time-consuming learning a foreign language can be, and that it is a false and dangerous fantasy for all average Koreans to desire to master English like a native speaker. “It’s absolutely unrealistic to expect and want Koreans to be fluent writers or speakers of English, when there is no opportunity for average Koreans living average lives in Korea to speak and use English. I have a professor across the hall who is an English-speaking foreign faculty member, and even I have little to no opportunity to speak English on a normal basis!”

“Koreans have difficulty making rational decisions for themselves, instead following the herd and mistakenly thinking that they made the decisions themselves,” Lee lamented. “They do not on a personal level critically reflect why they need English, but blindly desire to speak English like ‘natives speakers.’” Yong-Ju had actually said half-jokingly that a lot of college students attend private English institutions over the summer break “because they have nothing else to do and everyone else is doing so.” Many Korean college students feel the pressure to do something productive over the break to have a leg up in the competition, and taking English classes appears to be a relatively simple way to convince oneself that one is doing something worthwhile over the break and not falling behind in the rat race to a prestigious career post-graduation. (This is interestingly also true of some working or retired adults in Korea – when there is
no immediate need for English – who take English classes as ‘self-improvement’ and feel productive and improved through English learning.)

Lee, as an intellectual, was more critically aware about how English should be selectively and effectively used and applied in Korean society, and was resistant towards a rash adoption of English as a second official language or a blind worship of English as a superior language. However, Lee was significantly also acutely aware of Korea’s status in the world historically and today, and how that makes English an inescapable force to be reckoned with. Lee pointed out that compared to Japan, a country that has “a firm self-identity,” Korea lacks a confident identity and always looks for models to follow. For instance, he argued how in Japan, to be a professor at Japan one needs to graduate from a Japanese university, but in Korea, one needs an American degree:

“The last Korean dynasty Choson modeled itself after Han China, which Korea considered the most powerful, civilized kingdom in the world. Habit doesn’t change overnight. Now that China is not the biggest superpower in Korean eyes, it changed its model to the United States, the country Korea considers as the top global power and the most modernized country in the world. To Koreans, only the top power matters: France or Great Britain means nothing to Koreans. I don’t know what Korea will do if America falls! Even though there is growing talk about the so-called rise of China, Koreans don’t actually really believe it and think of that possibility only vaguely. If not, we would all be learning Chinese right now! This parochial vision and dependence on the ‘superpower’ of the day is a problem of Korea and the reason why Korea collapsed to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century when China fell to the West. Japan adapted quickly to changing times, but because Korea depended so greatly on China, it had to fall when the Middle Kingdom fell…Now times are changing, and the one-top system of the U.S. is shifting to a two-top system of China and the U.S.; if Korea wants to survive, it will have to strategically and wisely balance itself and follow the changing trends. Korea’s current relationship with China is not so smooth [because of China’s supportive connection to North Korea], and I worry this is not a good thing, since China is a big country and cannot be ignored. Korea needs to be very practical to survive. I feel like Korea is the Netherlands in Europe.
Netherlands is a small country, but has survived through time by being very practical. China’s sphere of influence is growing and it is almost now the new Soviet Union. We can’t ignore China; if you think about it, except the last century, China has always been a superpower, and – think about it – Korea’s placed at the very corner of China!”

What does all of this mean? Although Lee was critical towards a thoughtless veneration of America or English, he strongly believed that Korea is still a country that cannot avoid ‘superpowers.’ His honest acknowledgement that Korea is a small and relatively weak nation (vis-à-vis Japan, China, or the U.S.) made him argue for a practical stance towards English; he believed that Korea cannot and should not abandon English altogether as a country that is heavily dependent on the U.S. Local actors like Lee see Korea’s relationship with English in a larger global context, particularly influenced by how they imagine Korea’s national status vis-à-vis other ‘more powerful’ nation-states. English is thus a site where anxieties about South Korea being a vulnerable, threatened nation-state reveal themselves, and such anxieties powerfully inform Koreans’ experience with the English language.

**Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Korea’s Relationship to English**

Fighting against the common Western narrative of foreign English learners which largely imagines that they exist in an ahistorical vacuum, this chapter finally attempts to present an alternative narrative that gives readers a more nuanced depiction of what life is like as a foreigner learning English. Selma K. Sonntag in “Linguistic globalization and the call center industry” (2008) proposes three useful kinds of theoretical frameworks for thinking about linguistic globalization: linguistic imperialism, linguistic hegemony, and linguistic cosmopolitanism. I argue that all three frameworks are useful in understanding
the English boom in Korea and that each conceptualization allows for a fuller account of
the phenomenon, as observed during my field work.

**Linguistic Imperialism: “English Follows Me Around Forever”**

Linguistic imperialism is defined as the dominance of English that is made
possible by structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.
Structural inequality is how the “First World” imposes economic, political, and military
relations on the “Third World,” which make the “Third World” dependent on the “First
World” for survival in the global capitalist system (Sonntag 2008: 8). In the case of South
Korea, Korea is still heavily dependent on Western nations, particularly the United States,
after receiving aid from the U.S. in liberating itself from Japanese colonial rule. My
informants are young adults, who have needed English to move on through each
educational step, to find a decent job, and to get promotion. Korea as a nation is also
dependent on the English-centered global economy, since as a small country it is reliant
on exports to have access to the large, global market. Ji-Won, even though she was the
only actual English major in my informant pool, described that “English follows me
around forever.” She feels uncomfortable revealing that she is an English major, because
then everyone expects her to be a fluent English speaker with high TOEIC scores. Ji-Won,
the most politically conscious informant in my research pool, lamented that “Americans
are using us. We’re sacrificing so much time and money for their convenience,”
comparing slaving away learning English to how the Japanese once forced Koreans to
learn Japanese and adopt Japanese names. She feels that the life security and high salary
learning English offers her has forced her to become a ‘slave’ to English. Although there
is effort to present learning English as a respectable self-improvement endeavor and a
nationalistic endeavor that will improve Korea’s competitiveness in the world, she feels exploited and tricked: “I feel like a pawn in a big game,” all in service of American commercial and political interests, “I bet there are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of Koreans who think like myself, but we cannot do anything about the situation.”

The mundane, robotic nature of learning English in South Korea further feeds this negative feeling; for instance, students learn by rote thousands of vocabulary words and grammar rules in dry, lecture format and have little sense of fulfilling their potential. Although college students with high English test scores find jobs that allow them to make a decent amount of money in local standards, they are aware that their English learning is very limited and that they are still afraid to hold a simple conversation with a foreigner. Many are aware that English will hardly be used in the workplace but that they are required to take expensive English tests to get a respectable white-collar job and get promotions. Despite having learned English for many years, all of my informants (even Professor Lee) felt low self-esteem about their English abilities. Despite being able to read and understand English at a level that would be considered very proficient in American standards (for instance, an American college student who has learned Spanish or French for more than ten years would claim that they are close to fluency), my informants would frequently reiterate that their “English is not that great.”

The other side of the inequalities is the cultural: American culture and American English are “the current culprits in the march towards global cultural and linguistic homogenization” (Sonntag 2008: 8). The framework proposes that American English, along with forces like Disney and McDonald’s, is destroying local languages and cultures. In the case of my informants, some said they have to actively de-Koreanize themselves
and adopt Western names and identities, accents, and culture in their English classes and my informants are clearly culturally and linguistically influenced by the world of the English-speaking America, whether it is wearing Polo shirts, listening to American hip hop, or drinking Starbucks coffee.

**Linguistic Hegemony: “I Don’t Really Care What My English Name Is”**

While the linguistic imperialism framework pits the ‘First World’ against the ‘Third World,’ with countries like America dominating and controlling countries like Korea, the linguistic hegemony framework introduces the element of local human agency. This framework focuses on the “gaps and cracks” in the contested nature of the global capitalist system, moving away from the “overly structural, overly deterministic analyses common to the imperialism framework” (Sonntag 2008: 10). Although my informants are ‘forced’ to learn English, this framework argues that my informants are “neither homogenous nor passive” (Sonntag 2008: 10). Under this framework, those in the “Third World” are not submissive victims, who accept American culture as superior and engage in American-led global homogenization. For instance, Sonntag describes how English has been “indigenized” in India and used as part of the indigenous elite’s project to establish hegemony. Indian English, distinct from British and American English, is a local variety that is considered prestigious. Similarly, ‘Koreanized’ English (for instance, the grammar, vocabulary, and strategy-based style of learning English that brings Koreans high scores on standardized English tests and appropriate Korean-English mixing in daily conversations) is the prestigious variety in the local context. Although having full fluency of English from studying abroad in the U.S., Canada, or Australia is considered the most prestigious, having a high TOEIC score is considered respectable as well, as proof of
one’s high intelligence, hard work, and access to economic resources. While the linguistic imperialism framework would see Koreans avidly learning English as one-way impositions, this framework sees these as “skills that are relatively reasonable to demand of employees” (Sonntag 2008: 12, emphasis added). Learning English to get high test scores to score a high-paying white collar job is a skill, rather than “presentation of self” (Sonntag 2008: 12). This is in contrast to the linguistic imperialism framework, which would interpret speaking American English or using American names as oppressive practices that destroy the Korean “self.” One informant Seo-Hyeon, studying Education in a Seoul-based university, mentioned how he is “Steven” in his English class, because “American teachers have trouble saying [his] Korean name.” He added that “if they want, the teachers can assign [him] another English name. [He] doesn’t really care what [his] English name is.” This nonchalant attitude towards his names/identities shows that he considers this practice of having an English name as simply pragmatic and does not feel internally torn by becoming “Steven” for Americans.

Sonntag argues, then, that what is accepted is hegemony of American business practices, not necessarily American culture (2008). Indeed, some of my informants made fun of American culture and even Americans themselves. They are critical of the high level of obesity from prevalent American fast food or the promiscuous, excessive celebrity culture of Hollywood. Most of my informants were proud of what they considered unique Korean culture and Koreans’ hard work ethic as students and employees. Even as they felt insecure about their English abilities, my informants find their own strategies to empower themselves against low self-esteem about English, such as arguing that Americans cannot learn Korean, a language they consider “too hard” for
foreigners to learn, and asserting their pride over Korean culture. Maintaining self-worth and taking their insecurity about English abilities half-humorously are part of the human agency of my informants. Ji-Won, the most politically conscious informant, dealt with the stress of learning English by convincing herself that “unemployed, stupid Americans get to act superior to them and teach them English,” not because they are smarter or better, but only because America is richer and more powerful than Korea. Although Korea’s national status is admittedly lower than America’s, she believes that Koreans individually are equally or more intelligent than their American counterparts, which makes her able to get over her anger about having to learn English.

**Linguistic Cosmopolitanism: “Studying Random English Words Is Easier Than Solving My Life Problems”**

The last linguistic globalization framework introduced by Sonntag that can be used to think about the English phenomenon in Korea is linguistic cosmopolitanism. The linguistic hegemony framework introduced the element of agency, “but a subaltern agency circumscribed by hegemony” (Sonntag 2008: 15). In contrast, in the cosmopolitan conceptualization of globalization, “the agency of the individual is emphasized, even celebrated, in transnational, cross-cultural interactions” (Sonntag 2008: 15). In this celebratory outlook on globalization, individuals are free to choose their cultural experiences, instead of being limited in imperialistic or hegemonic practices. Cosmopolitan individuals are willing to sacrifice cultural authenticity (for instance, ‘Korean-ness’ in its essential, static form) for a liberating autonomy, allowing them to disengage from their own culture and immerse in another. This framework has a triumphant mood, celebrating diversity, creativity, and hybridity and asserting that
“cultures do not belong to anyone in the cosmopolitan framework” (Sonntag 2008: 15). Under this framework, English or fast food culture does not ‘belong’ to America; young Korean college students have just as equal claim to them as their counterparts in America. Young Koreans’ inventiveness in incorporating the ‘Other’ as their own is a positive attribute of globalization under this framework. English as a common global language is celebrated since it allows individuals from all over the world to communicate and collaborate; it is not seen as a threat to linguistic and cultural diversity. Under this framework, culture and language are free from “geographical boundedness” and “chauvinistic ideologies such as nationalism” (Sonntag 2008: 16). Learning English and adopting parts of American culture can be an opportunity to “create and invent something new and different and individually empowering,” with English ability as an “empowering vocational skill” in the age of globalization (Sonntag 2008: 17).

In this line of thinking, one can see that my informants are creative in how they create their identities, as Korea straddles between tradition and change. Even if they are using American-imported technologies or American-originated cultural products, those technologies and products have become localized and ‘Koreanized’ in the lives of my young informants. In Seo-Hyeon’s mind, Starbucks is not really a place that symbolizes cultural imperialism of America in Korea, but the place where he used to meet his girlfriend frequently after class. For another informant, Yeong-Ae, majoring in Music at a Seoul-based university, learning English is simply a “useful” job skill that lets her make easy money in relatively comfortable white-collar conditions and gives her leverage in the competitive job market; she argues that English is like any other skill, such as knowing how to use Microsoft Excel or Photoshop, in the workplace. Although learning
English indirectly brings them in contact with the heavy baggage of American neo-colonialism and global capitalism, my informants are more concerned with their own personal lives. “Sometimes, studying random English words is easier than solving my life problems,” Yeong-Ae once noted in passing during an interview, when she was discussing her problems with her ex-boyfriend.

Despite the high amounts of investment in time and money needed to learn English, some of my informants felt they had grown dynamically throughout the course of their English learning. Some grew a strong work ethic from studying long hours, while others found a new hobby or interest through English. Yong-Ju said he discovered the author Agatha Christie by starting to read her books in original English text to improve his reading comprehension, while Yeong-Ae said that she used to really enjoy learning English as a schoolgirl daydreaming about meeting and falling in love with a British prince. This celebratory, happy reflection of their English learning can be best explained under the linguistic cosmopolitanism framework in which individuals are not trapped in an overly deterministic, oppressive structure, but are free within their personal lives to find meaning and happiness.

*English Learning in South Korea: Where Globalization and ‘Postcoloniality’ Meets*

In Chapter Four, I discussed how English learning of South Koreans is intimately tied to the force of globalization engulfing countries all over the world. Along with globalization, ‘postcoloniality’ is yet another dominant paradigm for explaining the transformation of political and economic relationships in a world that seems to become “increasingly interdependent with the passing of time, with boundaries that once defined
national cultures becoming fuzzy” (Gikandi 2001: 627). Koreans learning American English is a prime example of such “fuzzy” boundaries, as Koreans invest enormous time and money into learning a new language and culture in a way never expected or demanded of them until the recent few decades. Gikandi explains that this new trend, however, is caught between “two competing narratives, one of celebration, the other of crisis” (2001: 629). The celebratory model asserts that globalization is not simply the homogenization or Americanization of the world, but that it is a new global culture based on reciprocal flows between the center (America) and the periphery (Korea). This is a new ‘post-colonial’ global situation beyond the era of the colonial empire; if Korea was once in a subordinate status to China, Japan, or the West, as a recipient of one-way cultural flows coming from the center, this new situation is one of hybridity, which opens up to a “multiplicity of cultural relationships unheard of in the age of empire” (Gikandi 2001: 629). This celebratory view is similar to the linguistic cosmopolitanism framework that Sonntag had described (2008).

However, the other side of the coin is the narrative of crisis. Gikandi writes that citizens of the ‘postcolony,’ such as the young Koreans spending exorbitant amount of their college career studying English, “unsure how to respond to the failure of the nationalist mandate, which promised modernization outside the tutelage of colonialism, are more likely to see their global identity by invoking the very logic of Enlightenment that postcolonial theory was supposed to deconstruct” (2001: 630). Gikandi cites the example of two Guinean boys who were found dead in the cargo hold of a plane in Brussels in 1998. They left behind a letter that pleads to Europeans to help them, that it is only them who can fix their miserable circumstances in Africa. Gikandi argues that what
the boys were seeking was not cultural hybridity, as the celebratory model would expect, but “a modern life in the European sense of the world” (2001: 630, emphasis added).

Ironically, the once colonized, now liberated boys want to mimic and become the colonizer. In this dystopic view, celebratory images of a new, more egalitarian global culture must be put into context of the real, material inequalities that shape everyday life and survival, such as those of the Guinean boys who grew up in poverty.

While the new local ruling class in the ‘post-colonial’ societies benefited from new independence, wealth and cosmopolitanism, the Guinean boys described by Gikandi or average Korean college students desperate for post-graduate employment are left out in the privileged, celebratory version of ‘post-colonial’ globalization. In this sense, ‘postcolonial’ globalization is deeply embedded in the history of colonialism and current ‘neo-colonial’ dynamics. Professor Lee’s understanding of Korea’s past, present, and future always placed Korea as weak and dependent, even if he was still proud and nationalistic of Korea. Some of my informants indeed felt a sense of inferiority towards Americans, even though they mocked some parts of American culture or the foreign English teachers in Korea. Ji-Won, as frustrated as she was with the dependent situation, made a comment that Korea cannot live with the help of America and that we have to “know our place in the world.” Furthermore, most of my informants who had never been to the U.S. had idealistic visions of life over there, which they stereotypically imagined using popular media images of glamorous cities like the Big Apple or beautiful white picket-fenced suburban homes.

In conclusion, my informants were living out the very tensions and contradictions that exist in the new age of globalization and ‘postcoloniality.’ Sonntag and Gikandi’s
work have been useful in reading the English learning boom in Korea in a more nuanced way that accounts for all the “gaps and cracks” in the standard Western narrative about foreigners learning English. Although the various conceptualizations offered by Sonntag and Gikandi may appear conflicting on the surface, the Korean English learning phenomenon and the identities of my Korean informants are complex and dynamic enough that they warrant different analytical angles to theorize them fully. English is indeed deeply intertwined with Korea’s relationship of power to the other countries (namely the U.S.), but the resulting picture is not so simple and easy to label in one short sentence.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis began with a simple question: why are South Koreans such avid learners of English? Using ethnographic research of Korean college students and contemporary Korean popular media, the thesis attempted to understand the ‘webs of meaning’ surrounding English in the unique, local context of Seoul, South Korea (Geertz 1973).

The English language entered Korea in the late nineteenth century and over time it has acquired different meanings in the local context. From the initial stages of its infiltration, English was intimately linked to the United States in the minds of South Koreans. English is now an intimate part of the Korean modern identity, officially part of the public education since third grade and Konglish widely used in the popular media and everyday conversations. English has evolved in to a foreign language of high prestige and practicality, with close links to ideals of cosmopolitanism, class distinction, modernity, and upward mobility.

A close reading of representations of English in the Korean popular media revealed that underneath the seemingly receptive and enthusiastic attitude towards English is a negative reaction to the growing importance of English in Korea. Popular media ranging from television dramas, news articles, to internet cartoons, have shown concerns about Korea’s excessive educational fervor that has fueled the intense competition to learn English, about average Koreans’ nagging feelings of inadequacy and discomfort towards English, about the English boom acting to undermine Korea’s national identity and betray Korea’s nationalistic interests, about English’s destruction of
traditional and happy Korean families, and about English being an expensive endeavor nationally and individually without corresponding effectiveness. Such public discussion about the status of English in Korea serves to raise average Koreans’ awareness about the dark sides of English having such a prominent status in Korean society. However, such popular media representations reinforces the very status quo, by highlighting how important English is and how it cannot be ignored. English thus remains a highly desired asset that Koreans are willing to enthusiastically and excessively invest in.

The experience of English described to me by the Korean college students in my ethnographic research is shaped by pragmatism and fantasy. On one hand, English test scores are deeply integrated into everything from college admissions requirements, college graduation requirements, company employment requirements, to company-wide promotion requirements. This makes learning and using English (at least TOEFL, TOEIC, or TEPS test scores) a highly practical endeavor. Acquiring the necessary amount of English the society demands of them will give my informants indispensable survival skills and real, tangible benefits in upward mobility and material success within the hypercompetitive environment of South Korea that worships educational achievements and considers high English ability the result of hard work and intelligence. On the other hand, the desire towards English experienced by my informants is also shaped by the element of fantasy: fantasy that English can change their identity and future prospects. English ability is frequently thought of as a good reflection of one’s (current or potential) socioeconomic background, access to different forms of capital, and sophistication or education level. Thus part of Koreans’ fetishistic attraction towards the English language and ‘buying’ English is grounded in how they imagine English to be a
powerful, prestigious language that will make them (or make them appear to be) rich, important, educated, and cosmopolitan.

Both local and global forces have a vested interest in keeping English an important language in South Korea. The profitable private English industry in South Korea, the local elite class that has privileged access to English and can use that privilege to maintain their class standings, and the Korean nation-state that can promote English learning to create an English-speaking, globally competitive (yet still nationalistic) workforce are all local agents working to keep English an important language that will not go away anytime soon. On the global scale, the social, economic, and political leverages given to English-speaking countries (and their peoples) motivate those nation-states and establishments to promote the continued spread privileging of English as the global lingua franca.

English, the language of today’s globalization, is a productive site to look at how Koreans are negotiating the potential conflicts between nationalism and globalization. English learning is deeply integrated in the state’s initiative to raise globally-competitive Koreans who can help Korea survive in the global economy. The rhetoric of becoming a ‘global citizen’ is heavily popularized by the state (and further taken up by universities and the private English industry, each with its own agenda); however the state’s real agenda is to produce competitive Koreans who are nationalistic and will be working for Korea’s own interest. Their goal is not to produce ‘post-national’ Koreans with free-floating national loyalties and the ultimate mission of the state’s promotion of English education is not for the benefit of English-speaking countries. My informants, accordingly, were thus against adopting English as a second official language, despite
growing up in an environment that had a high presence of English and accorded the language with high prestige and practicality. Their identity was firmly Korean, and their emotional ties to the ‘sacred’ mother tongue of Korean were apparent. To most Koreans, English is not experienced as a conflict between nationalistic and globalization, with English learning destroying their Korean national identity, because globalization itself (and learning English) is conceptualized as ultimately a nationalistic goal.

My informants, however, also had a strong desire to be ‘beyond’ the nation-state of Korea, a fantasy to be cosmopolitan ‘global citizens’ of Korea, even if that still meant living ‘at home’ where they had the comfortable majority status in society. They imagined that through learning English they can acquire a degree of cosmopolitanism and global-mindedness that has such cachet in Korean society today, although they have little to no prospects of ever living abroad or interacting regularly with foreigners in the local context. Even if some informants wanted to go abroad for some time to study or travel, it is significant that none of them actually pictured themselves permanently living abroad; despite their fantasies of being cosmopolitan and global, there was the stronger desire to be ‘at home,’ comfortably interacting with other Koreans and speaking Korean. Overall, Koreans are highly flexible and creative in how they imagine their place between forces of nationalism and globalization. While firmly situated in the local and bounded by the power of the Korean nation-state that continues to ‘nationalize’ them, they also simultaneously viewed themselves as global citizens with cosmopolitan aspirations.

English experienced by South Koreans does not exist in a vacuum, but is placed in a certain historically and globally-situated context. English in Korea is shaped by Korea’s history of ‘colonialism’ (vis-à-vis China, Japan, and now the United States) and
its current place in the global economy as an export-dependent country. Although the
global spread of English can mean multiple things, some scholars have pointed out that
English can be experienced as a tool of Western (namely American) linguistic and
cultural imperialism, with English acting as a politically charged force that can oppress
local peoples. In recent history, Koreans are particularly influenced by the power of the
United States, the country that has liberated them from the much-hated Japanese
colonialism and protected them from evil communism, particularly their arch enemy
North Korea. Even though there have been times of anti-Americanism, South Korea
remains ‘America-centered,’ continuously thinking of itself vis-à-vis an unavoidable and
powerful ‘Other.’ Local intellectuals have voiced concern about the excessive yearning
towards English learning in South Korea, which shows encouraging signs of critical self-
reflection, even if English and America remain as something inescapable in today’s
world. The experience of English is powerfully shaped by South Koreans’ anxiety
towards Korea’s (perceived) status as a ‘weak,’ vulnerable nation-state that has
historically been dependent on various superpowers to survive; English is often seen as a
‘necessary evil’ that must be obeyed in order for Korea to survive in the world.

Korea’s relationship to English must be understood in a more nuanced fashion,
taking into account both the structural inequalities on the global scale and the human
agency of local agents. Linguistic imperialism, linguistic hegemony, and linguistic
cosmopolitanism all approaches the issue of linguistic globalization from different
viewpoints, but each can be useful to analyze contemporary Korea’s complex,
contradictory, and tension-ridden relationship to the English language. English learning
in South Korea today is a point where the forces of globalization and postcoloniality
interestingly interlink, with Korea caught between two competing narratives, one of celebration and the other of crisis (Gikandi 2001). Koreans learning English are placed between the very tensions and contradictions that exist between such competing narratives.
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Crystal, David.


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Yoshimi, Shunya

Appendix

The bustling Gangnam Subway Station, Exit 6, my main field site in Seoul, South Korea

Advertisement you see while you walk up Exit 6 of Gangnam Subway Station. This has a photo of a ‘star’ English instructor at the private English institution U-star English, promising you a fast, high TOEIC score.
What you see as you try to leave Gangnam Subway Station from Exit 6. On the top, you see advertisement for YBM, one of the private English institutions that is “50 m” away out of this exit, the advertisement claims. The advertisement promises you the best “spec,” a local Konglish word that is a shortened version of the word ‘specifications,’ as in describing a computer. Having a good “spec” means having good qualifications to get prestigious jobs.
Students waiting and studying in the lobby of Hackers Academy, one of the private English institutions by Gangnam Subway Station

Students carrying English textbooks and square-shaped “hakwon” bags on the streets by Gangnam Subway Station
The prominent building and billboard advertisement of YBM, one of the private English institutions around Gangnam Subway Station

The “Pagoda Tower” by Gangnam Subway Station, Exit 6, which houses the private English institution by the name of Pagoda
The first floor lobby of the Pagoda Tower, which has an extensive schedule for all the English classes going on throughout the week.

Students waiting to take the elevator to their classroom in the Pagoda Tower, which houses one of the private English institutions by Gangnam Subway Station.
(Above and below photos) At the Kyobo bookstore near Gangnam Subway Station, there are many people in the ‘English Education’ section of the store, full of advertisement and books about learning English and achieving high scores on various English exams.