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## A Critical Multicultural Approach to Korean English Education for Socially Just Diversity

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to theorize a conceptual framework for Korean English education in response to the contextual need that South Koreans are facing in the age of neoliberal globalization. As an impact of globalization, the influx of foreign people and cultures has made South Korea a growing multicultural society. However, Korea's response to globalization does not reflect the multicultural aspect of its local context, considering the nationality and ethnicity of foreign residents in South Korea. By critically examining multicultural practices in Korean society portrayed in the media and in English pedagogy, which emphasizes linguistic competence and Western superiority in the name of achieving global leadership, this paper provides a critical multicultural insight that can help reshape educational goals for Korean English education. This paper highlights the importance of raising a socially just global consciousness for Koreans by incorporating critical multiculturalism into English education. Practical pedagogical implications for English teachers will also be drawn.

■ **Keywords** : critical multiculturalism, diversity, social justice, English education, South Korea

### Introduction

In Korea today, it is easy to observe the pervasiveness of globalization. Since *segzehwa* (globalization) was initiated by the government in early 1995 (Kim, 2000), many educational and governmental

institutions have advertised their programs by using the slogan of raising global leaders. Since English is considered the dominant global method of communication, English competence is perceived as one of the fundamental resources to achieve globalization (Jeon, 2012). In Korea, global leaders are often narrowly interpreted to mean educated people with English proficiency who can compete in a global context. The naturalized global hegemony of English as a commodity has greatly impacted Korean English education, which now aims at cultivating global leaders to ensure the ongoing and future economic success of Korea in a globalizing world. Although Korea's globalization brought on excessive educational fever for English (Shim & Park, 2008), there is no explication of the scope and definition of the globalization that English education intends to accomplish. English education, which emphasizes linguistic competence in the name of achieving global leadership, does not necessarily help Korean English learners to achieve a global mindset. Therefore, Korean English education needs a new conceptual framework that better addresses the impact of globalization and promotes diversity.

In other words, Korea's response to globalization should reflect the growing multicultural aspects of its local context. As an impact of globalization, the influx of foreign people and cultures has made Korea a growing multicultural society. The number of foreign residents in Korea comprises 4.57% of the total population, and the major ethnic groups are from East and Southeast Asia (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Interestingly and ironically, these ethnic groups are not included or sufficiently reflected in the discourse of globalization in terms of their race, cultures, and languages (Moon, 2000). Despite the geopolitical importance of these countries to Korea and the ethnic and linguistic diversity in Korea resulting from the influx of foreign population from those countries, few Koreans are concerned or knowledgeable about their languages or cultures (Fouser as cited in Yim, 2007). In addition, social prejudices and inequalities exist pertaining to their race and ethnicity (Oh, 2018).

In order to raise Koreans' global leadership and consciousness through English education, incorporating issues of diversity in English education is an urgent need with regard to Korea's emerging multicultural population. Although the need for multicultural education in response to demographic shifts in Korea has been recognized (Choi, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2012), little research has been conducted on Korean English education (Sung, 2007). Thus, it is important and timely to integrate issues of linguistic and cultural diversity, difference, and discrimination in Korean English education. That international interactions take place primarily in English highlights a need for creating a space for social justice as a component of English education. This means English education should encourage respect for various languages and cultures and prevent inequalities towards other cultures. Informed by a critical multiculturalism framework, this paper critically examines increasing cultural diversity and its repercussions in Korea, problematizes Korean English education regarding such diversity, and suggests practical ways to incorporate a critical multiculturalism into English education to better address social justice and diversity in this current age of globalization.

### **Globalization and Increasing Cultural Diversity in Korea**

The term "multiculturalism" prevails in current Korean society because of the increased number of multicultural families formed by marriages between Koreans and non-Koreans and foreign laborers. According to the Korean Ministry of Justice (2018), the number of foreign residents in Korea has reached 4.57% of the total population, numbering 2,367,607 people. The largest group of foreigners is Chinese (45.2%). Others are from Thailand (8.4%), Vietnamese (8.3%), the U.S. (6.4%), and Uzbekistan (2.9%). However, their races and languages are not included in the discourse of globalization in Korea. Instead, Korean society represents globalization as westernization, largely due to the global importance of English. Highlighting the role of English in the

guise of globalization, Koreans' affinity for English is rampant in Korean society and clearly demonstrated in Korean media.

Two popular Korean TV programs *We Got Married* (broadcast on Saturday evening on MBC, which had a viewer rating of 11.4% on October 2, 2010) and *Qualifications for Men* (broadcast on Sunday evening on KBS2, with a viewer rating of 23.5% on October 3, 2010) depict the status of English in Korea. In episodes of both programs, the participants had to complete a mission in which they had to demonstrate their English ability. They looked embarrassed due to their poor English while being interviewed by a white Canadian teacher. In both programs, there was no clear reason as to why they had to go through this ordeal, yet the rationale for learning English seemed easily accepted. In 2018, learning English is still an important goal for Koreans, as seen in the TV show *My English Puberty Season 2* (broadcast on Thursday evening on tvN). The show features celebrities struggling to learn English and depicts how they learn English within 100 hours. In the first episode of the show, the cast confessed their shame at not being able to speak English fluently.

Along with growing social interest in globalization and multiculturalism, the number of programs featuring immigrants and foreigners has increased in Korean media (Lee, 2013). It is noteworthy that in this media, English-speaking white people are represented as superior, whereas foreigners from Southeast Asia are depicted as working-class laborers. In Korean TV dramas, white men from the U.S. and Europe mostly play professional roles such as doctors and lawyers, and play attractive people with nice personalities. On the other hand, Southeast Asians, Central Asians, and black people mainly portray disadvantaged groups, such as women and low-paid workers (Ju & Noh, 2013). In addition, English is used in modern, professional, and luxurious settings (Ahn, 2017; Lee, 2006) while the Chinese and Thai languages are used as sources of comic relief (Jang, 2018). The racial and linguistic hierarchies and inequalities in the media reflect the discriminatory multicultural reality of Korea. However, media as a powerful source of

knowledge construction and dissemination can misrepresent the reality of Korea's multiculturalism, thereby creating and reinforcing certain values or ideologies.

As illustrated in the news title *We Got Married—Nichkhun and Victoria, can they reflect a multicultural society?* (Ja, 2010), the media implies that the couple's marriage in the TV show reflects the multicultural nature of Korean society. However, by displaying an imaginary couple from different cultures and backgrounds in wedded bliss, the media is merely paying lip service to the notion of multiculturalism. Nichkhun is a Thai American singer in a Korean boy band called 2PM, and Victoria is a Chinese singer in a Korean girl band called f(x). Their married life is described as being happy and romantic. With the heightened interest among Korean people in the multicultural couple, the program gained popularity; still, one cannot be certain that the increased popularity was due to the multiculturalism of the couple or because of the lifestyle that was portrayed. Either way, media producers continue to promote what sells, rather than what is real. What is important to discern is how the multicultural image that is created by televised events differs from reality. While the couple enjoys a luxurious and romantic lifestyle in the show, multicultural families and foreign laborers often struggle in real life due to Korean prejudices and lack of adequate governmental and societal support (Oh, 2018). Here, the concept of multiculturalism needs to be interpreted within the complex power relations of language, race, class, and culture.

### **Need for Promoting Diversity in Korean English Education**

In spite of the prevailing theme of globalization and the visible or invisible racial inequalities in Korean society, Korean English education has not been a venue to equip students for socially just understandings of other races and cultures. This is because Korean English education corresponds with a neoliberal perspective. As Harvey (2005) indicated, neoliberalism as “a political project to re-establish the con-

ditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (p. 19) has become “the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (p. 3). The neoliberal goal of education obscures the value of education and instead is linked to competence, resulting in increasing competition among students for socioeconomic success. English competence is considered an indicator of academic and occupational success, and Koreans invest extensively in English education to maximize their market value (Bacon & Kim, 2018; Cho, 2017; Jeon, 2012). This neoliberal twist implies that the skills and competence operate as a means for building capital wealth rather than social justice.

The two major strategies that inhibit educational changes are standardized testing and the subsequent teaching-to-test conditions found in Korean classrooms nationwide. Standards-driven and outcome-based curricula emphasize transmitting objective knowledge to students who demonstrate their memorized knowledge through standardized tests. Thus, what matters in learning English is not attaining sociocultural knowledge and critical consciousness in relation to English use but achieving high standardized test scores. In this type of educational system, schools degenerate into places for exams that encourage competition, and English teachers are only responsible for teaching language skills rather than cultivating socially and intellectually mature individuals (Kramsch & Vinall, 2015).

Given the impact on Korean society, the inequalities fostered by globalization and neoliberal ideologies in relation to language, culture, and teaching need to be critically examined (Pennycook, 2016). By promoting native-like standards, marginalization, and social inequalities through the policies, educational curricula, testing, and hiring system employed, Korean English education perpetuates the mythical superiority of Native Speakers of English (NSE) and Standard English (SE) (Pederson, 2012). In Korea, English is regarded as a language of Inner Circle countries such as the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Kachru, 1997). Racial discrimination based on White normativity in the Korean English language teaching (ELT) profession clearly

illustrates the false assumption that only people from Inner Circle countries are qualified to teach English (Jenks, 2017). Kachru (1997) argued that English no longer belongs only to native speakers of the Inner Circle, in that non-native speakers of English (speakers in the Outer and Expanding Circles) are now outnumbering native speakers of English (Crystal, 2003). However, in Korean English education, the target language users are viewed as English speakers from Inner Circle countries, and the cultures of those countries are considered the target culture in English education (Garwood, Gardani, & Peris, 1993).

A narrow view of foreign cultures leads to limited understanding regarding other cultures and reinforces the dominant ideology of Western superiority. The cultural content of Korean English textbooks and educational television programs largely focuses on the culture and people of English-speaking countries, particularly the U.S., and Korea (I. Lee, 2009; K. Y. Lee, 2009; Song, 2013a, 2013b; Yim, 2007). Emphasis on national pride in Korean English education in reaction to Western superiority impedes the appreciation of non-Western and non-Korean cultures and plays a role in discriminating against the minority cultures that exist in Korea. Similarly, Kubota (2016) argued that the neoliberal promotion of English teaching and learning leads to xenophobic nationalism.

Although intercultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity are no longer avoidable in ELT, cultural knowledge does not get much attention, as it is excluded in the evaluation part of the curriculum (Kubota, 2004). It is a timely issue to discuss and critically analyze socially constructed multicultural meanings embedded in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, and to introduce diversity through English teaching. The concept of English as a global language implies that culture teaching in ELT must enhance its cultural and geographical scope by including the cultures of non-English speaking countries in addition to English-speaking countries' and learners' home cultures (Wandel, 2003). Korean English learners should be able to question Western superiority and hierarchical evaluations of other cultures in society and care about racial minorities that exist in Korea and worldwide in the discourse of

globalization. The rationale for raising critical cultural knowledge of other racial and cultural groups and embracing a global consciousness for a socially just diversity in English education is strongly put forward by critical multiculturalism, discussed in the next section.

## **Incorporating a Critical Multiculturalism into English Education**

This paper takes a cultural approach in looking for a critical answer to linguistic and cultural assumptions and hierarchies in Korean society. The consideration of culture deeply relies on aspects of critical frameworks, in that critical cultural teaching aims to raise student consciousness about unjust social practices and produce a commitment to social transformation. In this sense, the concept of culture needs to be revisited in ELT. Culture as a system of meaning is profoundly related to how knowledge is socially constructed (Kincheloe, 2005). This socio-constructivist stance can provide significant insight into understanding how particular social meanings are constructed and how they affect individuals' understandings of culture and society. Similarly, Crawford and McLaren (2003) presented a poststructural perspective on culture. They argued that poststructuralism explores the situatedness and constructedness of meanings. The poststructural standpoint concerns itself with the relationships between people and their cultures.

With respect to creating an English pedagogy that promotes a socially just global consciousness, this paper draws on theories of critical multiculturalism and diversity (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). A critical multiculturalism theoretical framework provides analytic insights to critically examine cultural differences in relation to issues of power and domination. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) claimed, issues of multiculturalism and diversity need to be understood in the complex power relationships among groups and human suffering. Critical multiculturalism helps to explore how inequality and discrimination arise historically and contextually and how they occur in many aspects of society. In addition, it focuses on the way “[...] discursive powers shape



thinking and behavior” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. 25). Informed by the critical multiculturalism framework, Korea’s unique multicultural practices—how Koreans perceive, believe, and react to other races, languages, and cultures and how this creates social discrimination—need to be questioned and challenged in light of its complex context.

In a global society where multiple identities with a variety of differences are encountered, diversity and difference, not only racial and cultural diversity, but also differences such as class, gender, sexual orientation, communication, and lifestyles need to be rigorously discussed (Fairclough, 1999). What Korean English pedagogy needs for promoting diversity is to restructure the hierarchical order of such diversity constructs. A critical multiculturalism framework teaches us why it is important to create a critical racial and cultural discussion in Korean English pedagogy and how socially just practices may be implemented through critical education. The following section offers some key strategies that Korean English teachers can implement for critical culture teaching. The suggestions are important and applicable for all education levels but particularly suitable for the tertiary level because critical thinking involves in-depth exploration and discussion.

## **Practical Implications for Korean English Teachers**

### **Include Diverse Cultural Content as Texts**

In terms of textbook publishers, conferences, journals, and teacher education programs, the field of ELT is dominated by British and American interests (Braine, 2005). Likewise, the linguistic diversity of English is hardly addressed in Korean English education. Kubota (2002) asserted that the uncritical acceptance of Inner Circle English can cause social inequalities, marginalizing the actual ethnic and linguistic diversity that exists in local contexts. Using works in English by authors from countries where English is a second or foreign language is recommended to help widen Korean English learners’ concepts regarding English use and ownership. In addition, introducing non-dominant vari-

eties of English (i.e., varieties other than American and British English) can improve Korean English learners' intercultural communication skills. This attempt should be accompanied by the critical inquiries of power in language use.

Similarly, Nault (2006) suggested that English teachers use world literature to raise students' intercultural competence. English learners should understand that their target interlocutors are not only dominant English-speaking groups but people from diverse backgrounds of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Representations of ideal target English language speakers as white, upper-middle class, and North American in current textbooks and media contribute to the normativity and attitudes of perceived superiority with regard to that culture. Non-dominant groups are often omitted or assumed as "other" or peripheral to the core in the discourse of English education. Unequal and limited exposure to diverse cultures other than a Western and home culture in English education leads to English learners developing a limited knowledge of the world. By using texts from non-Western cultures in English classrooms, such as cultures of foreign residents in Korea, English teachers can raise students' multicultural knowledge and critical consciousness towards other cultures.

Korean English teachers can also help students create an inventory of the cultural topics and publishing companies of their textbooks to help them think about which culture is dominantly portrayed and where learned cultural information comes from. From this exercise, they can interrogate what knowledge is served in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and why problems often arise. Examining how their own culture is depicted and whether it is correct or not is an important starting point. They can also investigate how major Korean publishers play a big role in the English business and question what ideas they are promoting and what strategies they use. Through these classroom practices, they can learn to navigate the power map of language and culture.

## **Draw on Students' Lived Experiences in Classroom Discussions**

The second practical example of teaching culture critically in English classrooms is to affirm students' lived experiences as a teaching resource. The rigor in English education should be in critical engagement with real-life issues. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) urged teachers to recognize students' knowledge. They contended that teachers' ethnographic analysis of students' families and communities enabled education to be more meaningful and empowering. Their concept is related to Freire's (1970) attempt to use students' generative knowledge in the context of education. Capitalizing on students' cultural resources can be the first step in facilitating an empowering education and bringing social change and improvement to communities in which students are involved. Giroux and McLaren (1992) believed that "student experience is the fundamental medium of culture, agency, and identity formation and must be given pre-eminence in an emancipatory curriculum" (p. 24). Teachers can develop students' critical awareness by actively incorporating various sources of knowledge into their instruction.

Pennycook (2004) explained that "trying to be a critical educator is more often about seeking and seizing small moments to open the door on a more critical perspective" (p. 341). During conversations with students about pop culture, celebrities, course materials, experiences with other teachers or students, teachers often encounter important points to be discussed. Teachable moments are more easily generated when teachers expand their teaching materials to include students' experiences and reflections. Adopting problem-posing education (Freire, 1970), teachers can help students connect their lives to larger social and political concerns. Problem-posing can enable Korean English learners to investigate relevant issues and concerns that affect their English learning and lives. Canagarajah (2005) believed literacy should be relevant and engaging and could be made so by focusing on students' real-life problems. He asserted that social justice and transformation would be achieved through education which aims to raise students' crit-

ical consciousness on locally-situated social issues. Students' lived experiences are important sources of learning that engender their sensitivity and consciousness within a particular context.

Finally, English teachers should not hesitate to use technology in their classrooms, as technology is a useful tool in connecting students' lived sources of knowledge to course content. In order to stimulate discussion of social issues to enrich their instruction for critical teaching, teachers should empower students by giving them opportunities to express their experiences and concerns through technology. Possible examples of how this can be implemented may include participatory visual and digital methods such as video production, photovoice, and digital storytelling (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). The use of wikis and blogs can promote student collaboration and interaction (Ozkan, 2015), which are important aspects in bringing student-generated knowledge into classroom discussions.

### **Integrate Critical Media Literacy into the Curriculum**

One powerful way to implement critical cultural teaching is to use popular media culture as rigorous pedagogical texts. Giroux (1997) asserted that pedagogy should be inclusive of all internalized information that people are exposed to. English pedagogy should not be limited to formal education but should include social interactions, media, and other forms of cultural artifacts and representations. Popular culture is often dichotomized in terms of whether it is celebrating or polluting. Hall (1981) claimed that popular culture can be a site of struggle. He stated "popular culture is [...] the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (p. 239). Popular culture is a powerful drive toward affective investment for people (Grossberg, 1989) and one of the most powerful pedagogical resources (Steinberg, 2004). Today's students are significantly more informed by popular media culture than by formal education. While pedagogy has traditionally been used to refer only to formal teaching, the 21st century pedagogy cannot afford to overlook a cultural pedagogy

which takes the hegemonic power of culture into account. In light of the powerful involvement of popular media in our lives, everyday culture is indeed a curriculum in this new age (Giroux & Simon, 1989). It is an important form of education and a site of critical research on power and domination.

The time that Korean young people devote to popular culture is immense (Shin, 2016). In addressing how Korean youths gain knowledge of different races, languages, religions, and other customs and cultures, it is no exaggeration to say that they rely dominantly on media discourse. Media culture, defined as “a form of techno-culture that merges culture and technology in new forms and configurations, producing new types of societies in which media and technology become organizing principles” (Kellner, 1995, p. 2), is a powerful storyteller which creates a dominant memory (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). It plays a dominant role in constructing images of people and the world. Hollywood films, intentionally or not, in an obvious or hidden way, serve to construct and reinforce people’s attitudes about race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion (Giroux, 1999). Media and cultural studies researchers have studied Disney films as a form of cultural pedagogy (Giroux, 1999), as gender and identity constructions (Bell, 1995), and as ethnic or racial constructions (Steinberg, 2006). These researchers argued that Disney texts frame the experiences of people through images and narratives.

Knowing the politics of media representation is essential to understand the system of knowledge dissemination. Representation is the process or medium of construction of aspects of reality (Hall, 1997). It is mediated by memory, verbal descriptions, or images, but also constructs and strengthens knowledge. Hall (1997) posited how difference is represented as the other and how stereotypes are constructed in a reductive process that bifurcates definitions of self and the other. Despite Koreans’ limited contact with other races, they have created representations of other groups of people through media. In addition, they participate in knowledge production by creating discourses that

are influenced by the media. An audience's response to media messages varies; however, English teachers and students need to discuss why many people share similar stereotypes regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality.

It is important to discuss knowledge and ideology construction of race and culture in English classrooms. English learners need to be prepared for the globally networked and media-saturated world where there are massive opportunities for human interaction, both in person and via the Internet. Korean English teachers should recognize the power of media culture as a source of knowledge and include critical media literacy in English education (Kim, 2005). Questioning how certain groups of people are otherized, essentialized, and unpleasantly perceived in the media can be a good practice that helps students to understand the politics of representation. Reading media critically is one important strategy for unraveling how media reinforces and reproduces dominant knowledge, and how it creates alternative forms of knowledge (Kellner & Share, 2005). By critically using media, English education can be a venue for more complex discussions about language use.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is an attempt to theorize a conceptual framework for critical multicultural English education responding to the contextual need that Koreans are facing in this current age of globalization. Hawkins and Norton (2009) pointed out that the field of TESOL is being gradually influenced by sociocultural and critical approaches which recognize the importance of understanding language through the concepts of power and culture. However, further research in critical multicultural teaching within the Korean English educational context is needed. In addressing the significance of socially just diversity, this paper emphasizes incorporating concepts of critical multiculturalism in English pedagogy. Within this framework, questions such as how knowledge and culture are created and accepted, and how the globally dominant, influential, and powerful

language of English and Western culture are perpetuated, are analyzed under rigorous theoretical and pedagogical rationales. As Apple (2002) identified, it is time to acknowledge the importance of the role of education in the globalization of difference. Increasingly complex and growing social issues, such as immigration, studying abroad, foreign migration, mixed marriages, and increased intercultural contact through technological development and international business, must all be considered in pedagogical development.

As Korea becomes ever more multicultural in the age of globalization, a new English pedagogy is required—one that goes beyond the current competence-based neoliberal goals to include the goals of diversity and social justice. Extending the notion of English use into human interactions among different groups of people, English education should address the construction of knowledge, subjectivity, and unequal social practices pertaining to different socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds within the context of English use. Moreover, Koreans should seek to cultivate a global consciousness that enables them to equally include and respect diverse races and cultures in the discourse of globalization. Taking into account important concerns of contextual needs, Korean English learners need to know how to cooperate with other races; namely, they should develop skills and strategies to take responsibility as global citizens. Kincheloe (2001) claimed that education should encourage students to “become good citizens with the insight to identify social conditions that harm people and the civic ability to envision and implement alternative forms of social and political organization” (p. 286). In line with this, English education should be a venue that cultivates critical citizens for an intercultural world (Guilherme, 2002).

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Date of submission of the article: November 14, 2018

Date of the peer-review: May 9, 2019

Date of the confirmation of the publication: June 11, 2019