My journey: Interpretingthe English industry of South Korea

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In the fall of 2005 I went to South Korea to teach English. When I first arrived, a movement sometimes called "English Fever" was in full swing. This fever was evidenced by the abundance of western English teachers on the streets of the industrial provincial town in which I lived. I had taken a TESOL course some months earlier where the instructors regaled us with stories of the adventure and riches that could be attained by teaching English overseas. I chose South Koreabecause I knew someone who lived there. I ended up staying for over five years. During that time I taught English at public schools, private schools, small academies, chain schools, and at international companies. I was able to observe first hand that English and globalizationwere having a palpable impact upon Korea. I will discuss different factors that allowed me to get a job, certain details of those jobs, and some of my impressions of the affect that English is having on that country, and my return to Canada.

Background

As a first language, English is the third most populous after Mandarin and Spanish. Like Spanish, English owes its ubiquity to a history of imperialism. The British Empire expanded around the globe and subjected the populations of distant lands to its native tongue. More recently, English's predominance among world languages can be attributed to the economic domination of the US, specifically, and the effects of globalization and neoliberalism generally. English is the foremost language of academic journals, advertising, broadcasting, cinema, music, travel, post-secondary education, and international bodies (Crystal, 2003).It is the pervasiveness of the English language that legitimizes it and compels speakers of other languages to learn it. The value of English is based in the fact that it is the language of the powerful political and economic forces of the globe. The future of English as the new *lingua franca* is still being debated, but its present influenceworldwide is undeniable.

South Korea has a population of about 50 million situated within an area slightly smaller than the island of Newfoundland.At the end of the 1950s, South Korea emerged from the shadow of its crippling civil war with a per capita income of less than US$100. By 1996 that figure had grown to over US$10,000 (Park &Mah, 2011). Compare that to the growth of income in Canada from about US$2000 to US$20000 over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2013). As of 2010, South Korea had the 13th highest GDP in the world (Uk&Roehrig, 2010). This unprecedented growth would have been impossible if South Korea did not open up its borders to international markets and the byproducts that come with it.

Ease of Employment

Finding a job in South Korea was a surprisingly easy endeavor. I thought there would be a maze of red tape that would need to be disentangled to obtain employment in a foreign country but the process was often streamlined by the employer. A quick glance at websites like Dave's ESL Café shows that there are plenty of jobs for the taking. My first employer sent me to Pearson International Airport where I met a man who gave me a ticket to South Korea. My visa was

approved in days. The school provided houses for all its teachers; a common practice at private academies. Prior to obtaining my second contract, I arrived in the country with nothing. After a hectic week of interviews and an overnight jaunt to Japan to process my visa, I had a job secured.

The filling of positions is often mediated by a recruiting company that simplifies the hiring process for foreign nationals. The recruiters are well-paid for placing native speakers in the constantly turning-over English teaching positions. The interviews are often little more than finding out when the candidate can arrive in the country. Potential teachers are enticed with benefits such as pension contributions, health care, housing stipends, severance pay, and relatively lucrative contracts. Once in the country, the opportunity for making money 'under the table' through private tutoring is often too much for some ex-pats to resist.

The credentials required to teach in the private industry are minimal. Most academies only require a degree from a recognized university or college. The focus of the degree rarely matters. Biology majors and graduates of English literature are often regarded equally by potential employers. Even an education degree affords a candidate minimal preference. I had obtained a Teacher of Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certificate but it seemed to bear little weight compared to my qualification as a native speaker of a western country.

I received a job because of Korea's growing demand for English. My most significant credential was the cultural capital I wielded by virtue of my native language. Even though I had limited training as a teacher, my authority as an English speaker overrode other proficiency concerns.

Teaching English

My first year was the most diverse of the more than five years that I spent in the country. I worked in a private academy that catered to the English demands of young and old. I taught young professionals looking to improve their 'soft skills' in the morning before they rushed off to work. At lunch I practiced with company managers trying to adapt to the changing demands of an international company. I gave lessons to housewives learning English for status and enjoyment in the afternoon. Finally, late into the evening hours I instructed school aged children who were trying to do little more than to live up to their parents' expectations.

After this whirlwind introduction to the English industry I moved to Seoul, the vibrant capital, and worked for another private institution that focused on teaching school aged children. It was a franchise academy and its name had been established in educational circles. The school had textbooks and an online component that students were required to complete before each class. In the following contract I worked for an afterschool program that was the public school's attempt to capitalize on the thirst for extra-curricular education. Seen in a different light, this afterschool program was the government's system to provide some options for less affluent families. The programs were usually cheaper than their private counterparts and were offered at public schools. Finally, I worked for a private school in which I was the grade three English teacher. This final experience was most congruent with the public education system that we have in Canada because it was an institution where the children went during the day and matriculated from grade one to six. As a private elementary school, it enjoyed a measure of prestige. The tuition was not as

prohibitive as other high-status institutions despite this distinction, and a lottery for admission was held in the interest of impartiality.

Looking Back

I am often conflicted about how to view my experience in South Korea. On the one hand I was relieved to get a job with a degree thathas only limited employabilityoptions in Canada. I enjoyed a level of financial security that I would not find in my own country. Initially the job was easy because the school at which I worked expected little more than a warm body, as long as it spoke native English. I also enjoyed what I would call 'reverse racism' where my race was seen as a positivism from which I reaped many social and economic benefits. It was not until later that I began to consider the macro-level mechanisms that were at work and the role I was playing in perpetuating them.

I realized that, for better or worse, English is an international language. I believe that there can be great benefits in having a common language through which we can all communicate, but the tangential effects that the spread of English is having on the cultures of the world is obvious. In recent history English has spread because of globalization and the world capitalist system. This new, more subtle domination can be described as cultural imperialism. I have heard it referred to as coca-colonization. I spoke with Koreans who held this critical view of the presence of English in their country. They would bemoan the necessity of learning the foreign language and the expenses of time and money that it entailed. On the other hand, I knew Koreans that regarded English simply as a tool that the wielder could use to benefit themselves, their families, and their country. They did not worry about the history of the English language nor did they see it as a threat to their culture.

Korea has a rich history that is demonstrated by the complex traditions surrounding respect and the hierarchies of status. I recognized this most viscerally while teaching managers and team leaders at a large, international company. These men were older than me and had high positions in the organization. They were in the habit of receiving respect from younger members. Due to a tradition of Confucianism, however, they were compelled to hold me in high regard because of my status as a teacher. This reverence for the one who teaches is beginning to erode in Korean society as the younger generation begins to feel more and more entitled in an increasingly neoliberal society. Faith in public schools is dwindling as parents and students turn to private institutions to provide quality education. In traditional society the teacher was unconditionally respected, where in a neoliberal society the consumer is always right. If the teacher cannot perform, the forces of the market will induce economic penalties. This is a positive arrangement from an educational standpoint. Teachers that don't reach standards of excellence will be persuaded to improve their practice or leave the profession altogether. The problem occurs when we look at it in the context of economic realities. A significant portion of education, not just English, is being provided privately and is subject to the laws of supply and demand. As teachers or businesses prove their ability to achieve results, their demand grows. With this rise in demand follows a heftier price tag. As a result, the best and most respected education becomes attainable only by the highest classes of society. The place of English in Korean society today can be seen as a microcosm of the larger trend of neoliberalism. Those that possess a high level of English efficiency tend to be regarded as having high status. In this way, English becomes a form of

cultural and economic capital. The stereotype is frequently reproduced in popular media where the Korean who is fluent in English is cosmopolitan and hip, while the one who struggles with the language is an out-of-vogue country bumpkin (Lo & Kim, 2012).

I enjoyed the lifestyle that I was able to carve out for myself in South Korea. A big city has endless excitements, diversions, and novel activities to fill one's time. Living in a foreign country is an eye-opening experience. I felt quite welcome in South Korea but it was never truly my home. Besides wanting an education degree, I desired to return to the land of my birth where language is never an impediment and I implicitly understand the people and the customs. Perhaps it is true that to go far, one must return.

In the end I left South Korea to obtain my education degree from a Canadian university and legitimize my practice. I knew I wanted to teach but I felt I was missing an important foundation that I needed to become a better teacher. The Faculty of Education at Memorial University provided me with that foundation. I was able to apply many of the experiences that I had accrued to the classes that I was taking in the course of my degree. After completing my education degree I feel like I have a theoretical base to supplement my practical experience. I know that without my experiences in South Korea I would have interpreted my training at MUN much differently.

My experiences alone are not enough to understand the macro-level forces that have caused such rapid change in South Korea, nor is it sufficient reading material for anyone who wishes to undertake a similar journey.However, by looking at my personal interpretation of the English industry,we can see some of the effects that rapid change is having on education and culture in South Korea.

It is my hope that those that are considering teaching abroad can gain some insight from the experiences and interpretations I have put forth. So in closing I will offer a few suggestions to the interested. Firstly, do your research. Jobs are easy to come by and after reading through numerous postings they can begin to look the same. Despite this, the reality of each job can vary widely. Make a list of questions about details that are important to you before you schedule any interviews. Next, talk with people that have lived and worked in the place you will be going. Speaking with someone who has lived in a country of interest can help you consider aspects of life in that country that you may overlook. When doing this, however, remember to have an open mind and reserve your own judgment for when you are settled in your job and your community. The place you are going to is not Newfoundland. Comparing the difficulties of life abroad or the unfamiliar culture in which you are immersed to the comfortable and familiar life at home will rarely produce a positive state of mind. Immerse yourself in the language and the culture, get involved in the community, and enjoy yourself.

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