Who Owns English in South Korea?

 At Holy Cross, a small liberal arts college, I teach a first-year composition course that mixes accomplished writers of Standard English with students who would be designated as Basic Writers or English Language Learners at schools able to staff separate tracks. Fortunately, Holy Cross isn’t. I enjoy this teaching very much and I have described my course in an essay to be included in Bruce Horner and Karen Kopelson’s forthcoming collection called *Working English in Rhetoric and Composition*. So I am not going to talk about that course today. Rather, I am going to talk about English language teaching in South Korea, where I was privileged to work at Sogang, the Jesuit university in Seoul, in the summer and fall semesters of 2011.

 My presentation will have three main parts: first, I’ll provide information about English in South Korea; second, I’ll tell about the preparation that many of my Sogang students received in supplemental schools called hakwans, filtered through the experiences and opinions of the young expat staff members whom I interviewed; third, I’ll describe my own teaching at Sogang and the development of writing programs there. I’ll conclude with some reflections on what translingualism looks like in the South Korean context.

 An introductory note: although Koreans customarily state their family names before their personal names, I will follow the Western custom of reversing the names when Korean scholars have done so in their English-language publications. I will also often refer to “Korea” and “Koreans” when I mean the land and people of South Korea, though I regret perpetuating in any way the peninsula’s tragic division.

English in South Korea

 English is certainly a language that has entered South Korea from elsewhere, and many Koreans feel so much pressure to learn it that some scholars describe the country as gripped by a “collective neurosis of English fever,” as Jin-Kyu Park has it (50). According to one report, Koreans spent the equivalent of $19 billion on English education in 2009, distributed among English-language hakwans, private schools with an English-language curriculum, and schooling abroad in native-English-speaking countries (Lee et al. 338). Like the Slovaks in Catherine Prendergast’s study, Koreans are “buying into English” for economic reasons. As of 2010, about 55% of job interviews with Korean companies are conducted at least partly in English, and nearly 25% spend half or more of the interview time using English (Jambor). The Korean engineers who worked with my husband at Samsung communicated with their Chinese counterparts in English, and our young friend Hoi-Sung conducted his company’s financial business with European clients in English. It would seem, then, that English in South Korea might be considered to be another “devil’s tongue,” as English is in China, according to Xiaoye You, forced on Koreans by economic imperialism. But in South Korea, as in China, the situation is actually more nuanced.

The cultural meaning of English in Korea is conditioned by the fact that the country was never colonized by an English-speaking power. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Western powers pushed into other Asian countries, the ruling Korean dynasty resisted their incursions and actively persecuted Koreans who adopted Roman Catholic Christianity and Western learning (Collins 419). In this context, as sociologist Samuel Gerald Collins explains, English “could only be said to represent imperialism” (419). However, when Korean ports were forced open, not by a Western power but by Japan in 1876, Western academic and political ideas, Christianity, and the English language became associated with efforts by young Korean progressives to preserve their national independence and protect their indigenous culture. They started the country’s first English-language newspaper in 1896 to recruit international support for Korean sovereignty (Collins 420), and at the same time, successfully pushed for the unique Korean alphabet, called han-gul, to become the official letter system for the Korean language instead of Chinese characters (Lee et al. 346). When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, Korean patriots continued to use English to plead their country’s cause abroad. And English gained more positive regard when American-led forces drove Japan out of the country during World War II and then prevented a communist take-over of the entire peninsula in the Korean War of 1951 to 1953.

Nevertheless, English has never been made an official language of South Korea, as it has in Singapore, for example, and other non-native-English countries where the language is in wide use. In contrast, the so-called English fever of contemporary South Korea has developed in tandem with expressions of loyalty to Korean. The Ministry of Education promotes Korean-only materials, and a popular T.V. game show tests contestants’ knowledge of the language (J. S.-Y. Park 53-53). In a move that reminds me of the subversive humor reported by Prendergast among her Slovak English language learners, Joseph Sung-Yul Park describes an entire genre of self-deprecating Korean jokes about English language usage. One could argue that the existence of this genre, called “yumeo” (a Korean pronunciation of the English word “humor”), bespeaks Korean anxiety about their language competence, but I think it could just as easily testify to Koreans’ ability to externalize and minimize this anxiety. Moreover, Korea has been a site of linguistic mixing for centuries, so Koreans are perhaps better prepared than others to deal with the English language mixing in; Chinese loan words still abound in Korean, and a Korean-English dialect known as Konglish is also widely used in the cities, offering coinages such as “eye shopping” for what Americans would call “window shopping.” Over all, Koreans are intensely proud of their culture and they seem to exert considerable power over the English language’s place in it.

Expat English Teachers in South Korea

Expat teachers from native-English-speaking countries teach English in Korean universities and secondary schools, but the largest number work in after-school supplemental programs called “hakwans.” I will have more to say about English at Sogang University in a moment, but now I want to share some of what I learned when I interviewed twenty-six young expats—thirteen men and thirteen women—from the United States, Canada, Ireland, Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa (see Appendix). Over all, the expats’ stories suggest that Korean employers do not feel obliged to honor Western sensibilities about race or gender, nor do they promote kinds of language learning that would now be regarded as best practices in Western schools. For better or worse, their power to enforce their preferences on the expat teachers provides further evidence that Koreans own English in South Korea.

Other scholars, too, have interviewed expat teachers, and Mi-Hyon Jeon finds that “the superior position of native English teachers [due to their possession of the cultural capital of English] was not always realized in their lived experiences” (237). For one thing, the expat teachers had to deal with what one Korean-American expat interviewed by John Song Pae Cho called a “ ‘white men theory’ that ‘white people speak better English than Korean Americans’ “ (227). Indeed, teachers of African descent also were not welcomed in the hakwans. Many recruiting websites state openly that Black people will have a hard time getting hired. I was able to interview only one African American, whom I’ll call Kevin (all teachers’ names used here are pseudonyms). He tried for two years to get a job with no success, he believes for racial reasons. After his resume sparked interest from recruiters, they’d never call back once he sent the photograph every application requires. Eventually he told a recruiter up front that he is Black and the man was able to get him a job writing questions for hakwan English reading selections; his employer did not want to use him in the classroom for fear of parental displeasure, or so Kevin thought. Mexican American Rafael, who looks Hispanic to American eyes, did get a job in the classroom, but as he told me, “We kind of fly under the radar here, the Koreans don’t know we aren’t White.”

Being American is also an advantage, as might be inferred from the fact that fifteen of my interviewees are American—they are the ones who get more of the most desirable jobs in the greater Seoul area. North American accents (U.S. and Canadian) are favored. Emily, from South Africa, was told that her accent would make it harder for her to get a job. And anecdotally, I can report that our favorite expat bar in Seoul showed American football on its big-screen every week, reflecting the denizens’ interests, while in the bar’s second location in Daegu, a regional city, my husband and I found a lively crowd of New Zealanders cheering their rugby team.

Expat teacher Vanessa observes wryly, “I’ve had really big advantage, being female, being American, blonde hair, blue eyes.” Her comment suggests that racial and pronunciation preferences, Korean employers also consider gender in their hiring practices. Cho’s Korean-American teacher interviewees contend that “white female teachers were considered to be the most desirable for English conversation” (228), and the expats I interviewed concur: the general opinion is, as Miri told me, “Koreans typically look for young females,” and “appearance is huge—if you are older or overweight they are not interested.” Dana believes that “being a youngish girl” helped her get a job, but she’s embarrassed by the constant comments about her body made by both male and female Korean co-workers: “ ‘We like your skinny figure,’” “ ‘We like your curvy body.’” According to Kay, “They told me they hired me specifically because I was female and they wanted someone more nurturing and caring than my male colleagues.”

Though such remarks might be actionable in an American workplace, the expat teachers all report feeling relatively powerless in relation to their Korean employers. Even contractual obligations are often not met. Colleen’s complaint is typical: “I’m never paid on time,” and she once went unpaid for three months. Kent reports that “we are all walking on egg shells” for fear of getting fired, and he’s seen people axed for no reason (or so it seemed to him). Orson calls contracts “toilet paper”; when he protested a work day—not in his contract—that stretched from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. at three different locations, his employer threatened to inform Immigration that he had molested a child if he persisted in complaining. One of the Korean American teachers interviewed by Cho actually referred to himself and the other expats as “English prostitutes” (233).

The expats’ role typically is to provide conversation practice, and no prior teaching experience is required. Most do not teach English grammar; that is done by a Korean co-teacher. Eric complains that the students “just want to play games” and he is “an entertainer, not an educator.” Dana concurs: “I feel like Vanna White with my SmartBoard.” While Jim, one of the few professional teachers in my sample, notes that repetition and drill are necessary in learning a language—something the untrained expats may not realize—he too, expresses frustration at curricula that he sees as both rigid and disorganized. Meryl, a professional teacher from Australia, describes her school as “massively disorganized.” For example, in her kindergarteners’ science class, “every week you get a little pack of things they can’t do anyway” because they don’t have enough English to understand the tasks. Yet she is required to stick with the prescribed curriculum. Meryl prefers hands-on materials but her school won’t buy them, such as different sized containers for teaching metric measurement. Meryl also laments that there are “massive amounts of errors” in the school-generated English workbooks. She has successfully lobbied for some choice of reading books, the prescribed text being much too hard for the grade level, and she’s started a writing program in which the kids actually compose continuous prose; before, writing meant filling words into blanks or picking correct sentences.

Many teachers report pressure from parents to promote children to higher-level classes, as in these comments from Trevor: “Some parents set expectations that aren’t met by the child’s ability and they threaten to pull the child out unless he moves up,” but then the child feels lost and frustrated in a class that’s too hard for him. Dana reports that she was pushed by her employer to falsify placement test results in order to move children up. At the very least, it seems that Korean “English Fever” encourages competitiveness that American educators might deplore.

The happiest teachers are those who are allowed to design their own course materials or who get to teach content-related courses. Bob loved a middle-school group with whom he read novels such as *Life of Pi* and *Lord of the Flies*, and Hannah cherishes her one experience teaching history to English-proficient 6th-graders. Steve and Rafael are pleased that their new employer, a hakwan that teaches a range of academic subjects, has allowed them to start a debate class. Thirteen of the twenty teachers in my sample with no previous teaching experience have found their work rewarding enough to obtain ELL teaching certificates or apply to graduate school in education. They generally express warm feelings about their students. Vanessa got “very emotionally attached” to her kindergarteners and Guy felt like “a big brother” to his young students. Shaynah emphasizes: “The kids were the best part. Their faces are just awesome when they understand something. It’s very redeeming.” Many agree with Kay and Bob that their students are “really bright” and “trying hard.” Maybe too hard—several teachers express concern that their students’ schedules are too demanding and thus, as Hannah put it, “the kids don’t get to be kids.” However, I have no intention of criticizing the demands many Korean parents place on their children. My point is that whether or not the Korean system offends the sensibilities of the expat teachers, they have very little control over its expectations, either on the students or on themselves. Koreans are in control.

Teaching English at Sogang University

English proficiency tends to be distributed in Korean society according to economic advantage, a situation not unfamiliar to American educators. English is taught in the public schools, but parents who can afford it send their children to the private-pay hakwans. The more prosperous send their children to schools with a full English curriculum; and the most prosperous send their children to native-English-speaking countries for schooling. English proficiency is expected at least of those students who make it into top Korean universities. At Korea University, 35-45% of classes in all subjects are taught in English, and the percentage at Sogang is not far behind. A quick on-line view of the Sogang English Department’s course offerings reveals a curriculum in British and American literature similar to most U.S. schools ( [www.sogang.ac.kr/english/academic/103\_under\_0105.html](http://www.sogang.ac.kr/english/academic/103_under_0105.html) ). Not surprisingly, my best students at Sogang were those who’d had the opportunity to study abroad.

In the summer 2011 term, I taught a Composition course, the last of three English courses required of all graduates. My group of seventeen included some high-achieving students who wanted to get the requirement out of the way and others who had failed the course before and were now repeating it. I was given a workbook-based curriculum that included a lot of short-answer exercises and one-paragraph written responses to very short academic reading assignments. The level of this curriculum may have been about right for most of my students at first, and probably familiar to those who’d had hakwan schooling, according to what my expat interviewees told me. But the field quickly began to spread out, and most seemed to become bored with it by the end of the second of our five weeks of classes. I encouraged my students to try longer writing assignments, which seemed well within the capabilities of most of them. These students’ fluency in spoken English varied, too; some could contribute comfortably in spontaneous class discussion, while others remained silent unless presenting one of the oral reports I added to our task list, in which case they spoke pretty well.

I assigned general paper topics that allowed the students considerable leeway in choosing their specific topics, something they found unusual, though they liked it. For example, one assignment asked for a description of “then and now,” how something has changed in their own lives or in Korean culture. John, probably the weakest student in this class, decided to contrast college life with his prior military service, required of all Korean men (I am reproducing all the excerpts here exactly as written):

When I started my military service, I received 4 clothes and 2 pairs of shoes from a supplier. I had to wear only these clothes during 2 years! It is too small in number. And I can’t find any sense of passion on this clothes. And the quality of this clothes is low. It seems that military clothes make me dull. And it gets rid of my personality. I don’t like this clothes. But in college, you can wear any clothes. Your clothes look good, and you can show your character through your clothes.

I think John is able to convey something of his droll sense of humor here. Believe me, John also liked to show his character in the sharp clothes he wore to our class!

Here’s another paragraph from one of the best students in this class, Melissa, who’d spent a high school year in Illinois. She decided to talk about changes in how Chusok, a major Korean holiday, is celebrated:

Among Koreans, it is thought to be their ancestor’s distribution that crops grow well and become available for them to harvest. So traditionally this time around, whole relatives gather and perform ancestral rites to appreciate for the year’s harvest and pray for next year’s. For this ritual, Koreans prepare many kinds of food including dishes of meat, vegetable, and fish and so on. However, Women’s sacrifice is what really has been supporting this custom. Who will prepare the food for the ritual? Korean women; mothers and elder daughters do. Now even new syndrome has occurred. It’s named “A holiday syndrome”. When it gets nearer and nearer to big holiday such as Chusok, women feels like they are down with some illnesses. Their body aches without a reason. The cause of this syndrome is huge stress ladies get from the thought of doing hard work during the holiday.

Melissa conveys her modern Korean feminist perspective here—a viewpoint that’s rather new to Korea. By the way, Melissa was a Chinese Studies major but wanted to improve her English for use in the hotel industry in Shanghai.

In the fall 2011 semester, I taught an introduction to literary study course comprised also of first-year students, and almost all of the nineteen were able to deal quite well with the American textbook I used and the literature we analyzed (poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, short stories by James Joyce and Eudora Welty). I had more freedom to choose the course materials here, but choice was constrained by what English-language books were available in Korea. Here’s the beginning of Jay’s analysis of Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”:

“Whose house this is I think I know. He is in his working place though; He will not see me stopping here to watch his house fill up with bright sunshine.” When I was a high school student, studying and staying in the high school more than 12 hours in a day, I longed to escape from that prison, looking outside the school. There was beautiful village near school which was seen from the class where I studied. The outside place of the school seemed really peaceful and lovely. In school, I struggled to survive from the competition for university entrance exams, but in the peaceful village near school, there played children without any concerns and worries. The house wives come and go and other people seemed that they were enjoying their own time. I wished I had belonged to that peaceful world. But I had a thing to do, so I went back to my study putting up with inconvenience.

Jay goes on to explain that he had “miles to go” like Frost’s speaker, and wonders whether either of them will ever get a break from harsh life. Many Korean students will tell you that high school in their country is much harder than college, because of the entrance exams Jay mentions.

I also taught an American novel course, “Sexuality and Literature,” in which I decided to feature narratives on learning to perform one’s gender, that is, to behave in appropriately masculine or feminine ways. Gender role conventions are changing in South Korea right now, calling the traditional patriarchy into question, and the topic was provocative for my fourteen junior and senior English majors. This course differed very little from what I would have offered my upper-division majors at my highly selective American Jesuit college: for the Korean students (plus one exchange student from France and another from China), six novels instead of eight or nine, and 5-7-page papers rather than 10-pagers, though the assignment topics were similar. These students made more errors in English that I usually see among my Holy Cross students, but they wrote well and analyzed literature sensitively. There really were no weak students in this class, but one of the best was Jamie. Here’s her opening paragraph from a paper on social climbing and gender:

American dream has been one of the key concepts for understanding American culture, whether past or present, as it is the idea that has constructed the Americans’ behaviors, work styles, and relationships. Basically, it is the idea that people can succeed and live happily and affluently through hard work, which was originated in a time where people from European countries started moving in to America for economic and social freedom. As it reflects hopes and lives of Americans from dating back to 1600s to today, it has been used in many different novels as the central theme. In the two major American novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *Bread Givers*, the idea is also at the center, leading main characters dreaming of achieving high status in American society. Of all different hopes and dream for achieving American dream, women are mostly portrayed as wanting to change their lives through marrying up into the group of people from rich backgrounds rather than choosing their loving ones. For instance, in book *Bread Givers*, the issue of marrying up is at the center as the four Jewish American sisters confront problems with their father who strongly believes that his daughters have to marry up to sustain their immigrant lives. The choice of marrying up can also be found from the book *Great Gatsby*, particularly through the character Daisy. By seeing the marrying up issue in the two novels, I would like to find the reasons behind women dreaming of marrying up.

This opening paragraph is not radically different from what I get from my Holy Cross students, and Jamie, the author, came to Brown University on a Fulbright in fall 2012, to get a degree in American Studies.

I was supposed to be teaching the English language, so in responding to all these students’ papers, I did something that’s rather out of fashion in American pedagogy: I used two different colors of ink, one to write corrections and explanations of their English errors, and the other, comments on their ideas and argument structure. In all three classes, the students expressed pleased surprise at the attention I gave to their ideas. In the Korean language, the verb for “taking” a course is “listening” to it, and I gathered that they did not expect to have to take so much initiative in designing critical analyses. Most of them seemed to like it, though they also took a workmanlike and determined approach to improving their English.

In addition to teaching these courses, I also helped to launch a writing-across-the-curriculum program at Sogang and a writing center where students could get help with both English and Korean language writing. In addition to prioritizing course offerings in English, Sogang has a vibrant Korean language department and one of the best programs in the world for teaching the language to non-native speakers. New to Sogang faculty, however, was the idea that those who were teaching subjects other than English or Korean might need to pay attention to how their pedagogy was developing students’ ability to write academic discourse in the languages—or not. Their questions and concerns would be familiar to anyone who’s directed a WAC program at an American school. I conducted several workshops with my colleague Yo-An Lee for faculty and for graduate student T.A.s and writing center tutors, and also helped arrange for Charles Bazerman and Carolyn Miller to visit Sogang. Although both programs were engaged in pitched battles for funding while I was there—again, a situation familiar to U.S. WPAs—I was privileged to attend the dedication of the writing center a couple of weeks before I left Korea. It is centrally located on campus, in the same building as the Office for Jesuit Mission, and equipped with much nicer furnishings and more up-to-date electronics than our modest little writing center at Holy Cross.

Reflections on Translingualism in South Korea

The English language is woven into Korean culture everywhere. Road signs throughout the country are printed in English and Chinese as well as Korean. Shopfronts sport English names, even those that are not outposts of familiar American franchises such as Dunkin Donuts and KFC. Endless reruns of American T.V. programs, in English, are shown on Korean T.V., and the commercials often feature tag lines in English, as in the ad for a restaurant in which a handsome young hipster croons, “I love steak!” while forking juicy bites into his mouth (the rest of the commercial is in Korean).

This is not to say that large numbers of Koreans are fully bilingual in English and Korean, but then, they do not need to be. One of the great advantages of the translingual model of language interaction is that it highlights the obsolescence of the idea that in order to “have” a language, you must possess near-native fluency in it. Not all Koreans have equal power over how English is integrated into Korean culture, but I concur with Mi-Hyon Jeon, who uses Stuart Hall’s concept of “postmodern globalization” to explain South Korea’s role as an “agentive state” successfully participating in the globalization process, including the global spread of English, and adapting it to local conditions (233, 234). Samuel Gerald Collins agrees:

While generic invocations of imperialism may remind us to eschew cultural chauvinism in the classroom, these tell us little of the cultural practice of English in specific social and historical contexts. . . . After all, hegemonic processes are not just the top-down imposition of beliefs . . . . English is already *part* of “local” culture; those relationships ultimately determine the shape of “world Englishes.” (427, 418; italics in original)

Thus, as Jeon argues, globalization should no longer be seen as “an external force which undermines national sovereignty” (234). And as Xiaoye You reports about English in China, “English is no longer a language owned by any particular people or nation” (9); South Korea, I contend, owns English in its own way just as much as any country where it is traditionally the native language.

 Translingualism in South Korea might provide a model, too, to diversify the linguistic landscape at the American college where I teach. I struggle against the English-only attitude that seems to prevail at Holy Cross. Languages other than English are rarely used in courses that are not language-learning courses. I wish there were more like the liberation theology class that’s being taught in Spanish because so many significant sources have been written in Spanish. You can take the course if your Spanish is good enough. But what about integrating different languages into more courses, where academic-level fluency might not be required, or not of every student? A biology professor told me recently of sending her students to track down foundational articles concerning a line of research the class was studying, and the team that found the article in German professed themselves to be utterly stymied. What, no one on campus could translate it for them? Highly unlikely. They just thought they shouldn’t have to get that done because it was a bio class, not a German class. I wish we could cultivate the attitude that encountering different languages was normal and a lack of near-native fluency should not cause panic. That seems to be the attitude that prevails in South Korea.

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Appendix

My American Jesuit college’s Human Subjects Committee approved the design of my research into the experiences and opinions of the young expat English teachers in Seoul, which I modeled on Catherine Prendergast’s method with her Slovak interviewees (see 19 ff).. I prepared a consent form that each interviewee and I signed, with one copy for me and one for the interviewee. I let the person know that I intended to publish this research and that I might quote his or her words, paraphrase them, or bundle the responses with those of others to indicate trends, but that I would not use his or her real name. I stated that to the best of my knowledge, the interviewee incurred no risks by participating in my project. I have contact information for my interviewees and plan to let them know if my research is published.

I prepared a set of 24 questions, provided to each interviewee, that ask about his or her educational and work background before coming to South Korea, teaching experiences in South Korea, views of English use in South Korea, life in the Seoul expat community, and experiences with Korean culture. While these questions indicated my general areas of interest, we did not proceed through them in lock-step fashion. Some interviews stuck more closely to this script than others, but in general, the questions served as guidelines for me to ensure that all my interviewees were asked for similar sorts of information. Most interviewees talked freely with little prompting from me.

I met my interviewees through my husband. He had preceded me to South Korea and formed a friendship network among the young expat teachers who frequented a popular bar and grill in our Seoul neighborhood. Conversations with the expats made me realize that they had valuable information regarding the spread of English worldwide, as those who are teaching it have received little scholarly attention. I began by asking the expats I had met if they would be willing to be interviewed; once my interview project got under way, word of it spread in the community, some people asked to be interviewed, and others accepted invitations from me in order for me to get a balance of men and women among the respondents and to represent every country of origin. I spoke with fifteen Americans, four Canadians, two Irish, and one person each from Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa. Thirteen are men and thirteen are women. All had experience teaching in hakwans, and a few also had experience doing similar work in the public schools; two had moved on to adjunct positions teaching English at the university level. One had entered hakwan management.

I interviewed each person for one to two hours in a restaurant or coffee shop in our Seoul neighborhood. I took extensive notes during the interview and also requested a current c.v. I was able to type up these notes within 48 hours of each interview and to email any clarification queries that were needed. Tape-recording the interviews did not prove feasible given the ambient noise in our interview locations.