

# English Education Policies in South Korea: Planned and Enacted

Jeehyae Chung and Taehee Choi

**Abstract** In South Korea, the government has actively promoted English proficiency as an indispensable tool in ascertaining competitiveness of individuals and the country. This chapter examines English education in South Korea and its policies as contextualized in its socio-cultural backgrounds. The discussion draws on theoretical insights that view policies as an interactive process among policy documents, the context and the actors in it (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Menken & García, 2010). First, the background is laid out by illustrating the symbolic and practical meaning of the English language in the Korean context. Following that, the chapter traces the changes in English language teaching (ELT) policies through a historical survey of curricular reforms and also presents the current agenda of ELT policies, within which the communicative approach is strongly recommended, as reflected in the seventh National Educational Curriculum. In an attempt to investigate ELT practice in context, two case studies, one at the primary level and the other at the secondary level, are presented, particularly to determine the relationship between policy and practice. Both case studies demonstrate that while teachers make efforts to follow the policies, how they actually implement them depends on their unique contexts and individual beliefs. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and policy making.

**Keywords** South Korea • English education policy • English language teaching • Medium of instruction • Teachers as actors • Actor agency • Language planning and language policy • Policy enactment

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## 1 Introduction

In South Korea, Korean is the only official language of the country. Still, of all foreign languages, English has the most prominent status, which is reflected in the recursive move to establish English as the second official language (e.g., Shim, 2003), although futile up to the present. The English language is not spoken as much by the general South Korean public, but it is considerably visible in the linguistic landscapes of South Korea and prevalent in popular culture. In South Korea there are also a number of English-medium newspapers, television networks and radio broadcasts. As such, it is safe to say that the English language is quite ubiquitous in South Korea, attesting to its significance in the society. English proficiency is perceived to be an indispensable tool in helping individuals and the country as a whole gain competitiveness in today's globalized world. With so much attention concentrated on English, it is not surprising that English language teaching (ELT) is a key agenda in South Korea's education policies at all levels.

This chapter attempts to provide a holistic picture of English education in South Korea by shedding light on the related policies that have driven it. The discussion is informed by scholarly work on language education policies, particularly that of Menken and García (2010), as well as policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), which is introduced in section two. Section three describes the relative status of Korean and English and the educational system in South Korea to contextualize the chapter. Section four starts with a brief historical overview of English education policies as manifest in the National Educational Curriculum (NEC) and the socio-political factors that influenced them. It is then followed by a description of current English education policies. Section five will look at English education policies in practice at the primary and secondary levels through case studies in the respective contexts. The case studies will show how policy actors – teachers in particular – enact the policy. Implications for future policymaking will conclude the chapter.

## 2 Theoretical Background

The field of language planning and language policy has greatly evolved throughout the years. Earlier scholarship focused on language planning that was focused on the languages themselves, mostly concentrating on such language planning activities as corpus and status planning. These activities and the policies that drove them were mainly related to nation building, concerning how languages would be used. The role of education in language planning was not as emphasized until Cooper (1989) suggested a new type of language planning called acquisition planning. Acquisition planning concerns the users of the languages that are affected by corpus and status planning, and the policies that originate from acquisition planning are generally called 'language education policies' or 'language-in-education policies.' As conceptualizations within the field have broadened, the field has also seen a shift towards a more dynamic and eclectic approach to language education policies. Menken and García (2010)

highlight such dynamism in language education policies, arguing that they cannot be considered in a vacuum, but should be viewed as a “dynamic, interactive and real-life process” (p. 4) shaped by a particular context and people in it. Within this process they accentuate the central role that teachers take in implementing these policies and also stress that the contexts the teachers are situated in are not simply backgrounds but vital parts of the policies. The teachers are seen as agents of change and true policy and decision makers. We follow this relatively recent conceptualization in this chapter, first because it is congruent with the stance of the South Korean government in relation to curricular innovations. At least in documents, reforms concerning language-in-education always address teacher change by including measures such as recommendations for new teachers’ classroom assessment, and revision of pre-and in-service teacher education (e.g., Ministry of Education Science and Technology, ca. 2011). The conceptualization is also relevant, because the case studies that are presented here particularly look at how teachers implement the policies.

We found the agendas and language of policy enactment theory (Ball, et al., 2012) particularly useful for our analysis and discussion. In tune with Menken and García (2010), policy enactment theory is interested in the policy implementation process and takes an eclectic approach in that it looks at the reciprocal relationship between policies and the actors of the policies. To illustrate, Ball, Maguire, Braun, and Hoskins (2011a) discuss how teachers are constrained by policies in their actions, talks, and even thoughts; and at the same time document teachers’ adaptation and re-creation of the policies (Ball et al., 2011b).

The other critical issue that we wanted to address is the relationship between globalization and English. It is hard to deny that English has become the lingua franca of global communication. Many entities including governments and large corporations have purposefully adopted the language to propel their interests and needs in a globalizing world. While some say that English can be adopted as a neutral tool to be utilized solely for mutual understanding among peoples with different language backgrounds (Jenkins, 2006), there is also a significant amount of concern surrounding the spread of English and the impact it has. While it is true that East Asian governments have been able to appropriate English for their own purposes, critical perspectives on this trend argue that such avid investments come at an expense, in terms of negative influences on national and indigenous languages and cultures (Baldauf & Nguyen, 2012; Canagarajah, 1999; Piller & Cho, 2013; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). This debate also forms a frame of reference and context for this chapter.

### 3 The Context

#### 3.1 *Korean, the National Language Versus English, a ‘National Religion’*

Sociolinguistically, Korea is an ‘ethnolinguistically homogeneous’ society (Lambert, 1999). This implies that most Koreans speak a single language, although there are a relatively small number of linguistic minorities. With the continuous

increase of foreign migrant workers and interracial marriages, the demographic constitution of South Korea is rapidly changing. Nevertheless, the dominant image Koreans have of their country is that of ethnolinguistic uniformity. Koreans generally have a strong sense of pride for their language and the writing system of Hangeul. On the other hand, modern South Koreans also have an extremely strong sense of dedication and zeal towards learning English. The enthusiasm is so intense that it has been described as a 'national religion' (Demick, 2002). As noted earlier, English is more than a foreign language in South Korea. It symbolizes modernity (Lee, 2006), personal competence, success and socioeconomic status (Choi, 2007). Shim and Park (2008) traced the history of English's prestige in South Korea up to as early as the modern nation building process, and noted that English has always had a prominent symbolic value in South Korea as a language spoken by the rich and powerful. They argue that as the government propelled its globalization agenda in the early 1990s it appropriated English as an indispensable medium to achieve globalization. Subsequently, large corporations and institutions of higher education followed with the same attitude, further making English proficiency an essential requirement for entering schools, and securing and maintaining jobs. In effect, English proficiency now plays a gatekeeping role that ultimately impacts the real lives of most South Koreans. This led to individual investments in the private tutoring market of English teaching which is estimated to be the equivalent of five million US dollars per year at the K-12 level alone (Statistics Korea, 2012).

In spite of the enthusiasm and the amount of investments put into English education, South Koreans do not seem to be reaping such fruitful results. According to a recent analysis of English proficiency of 60 countries across four continents (excluding North America where English is the first language for most) conducted by the Swiss-based language learning company, Education First (EF), South Korea's performance is very modest. Within a five-scale proficiency index ranging from very high proficiency to very low proficiency, it was classified under moderate proficiency (Education First, 2013). Among the 60 countries that were surveyed, South Korea was ranked 24th. To compare with other countries in the Asian region, South Korea was far behind Malaysia and Singapore which ranked 11th and 12th respectively. However, it performed slightly better than Japan, which closely trailed behind South Korea at 26th, and Taiwan and China which landed at 33rd and 34th respectively. Recent data from another English proficiency measure, the internet based TOEFL iBT tests released by the Educational Testing Service (2012), confirms the relative ranking of South Koreans' scores in 2012 in comparison to the same Asian countries mentioned above. Again Singapore and Malaysia scored the highest at 89 and 98 respectively. South Korea lags behind these two countries at 82, but performed better than the other three countries, Taiwan, China, and Japan, which scored 78, 77, and 70. Such results may be explained by differences in the sociolinguistic contexts of these countries and their colonial history (For a comparative study of English language education policies in Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea incorporating these differences, see Choi, *forthcoming*). While South Koreans seem to be relatively high performing amongst the expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1992), nonetheless these results do not seem to reflect the amount of interest and

investment Korea puts into English education. Such interest and investment are described in the following section.

### **3.2 *Educational System of South Korea***

In South Korea, official English education starts in the third year of primary education. However, it is a known fact that children start learning English earlier than that, either through private pre-schools or publicly subsidized pre-schools that all include English education in their curricula. At the secondary level, English is a compulsory core subject until the first year of senior high school. Although English becomes an optional subject from the second year of senior high school, most students decide to take it due to its perceived importance. Students also receive a lot of English teaching outside of the realm of official public education, e.g., through conversation schools, as reflected in the astronomical expenditure on private English education noted above.

Two distinctive characteristics of South Korea's English education policies are, first, frequent and numerous innovations, and second, the central role of the Ministry of Education (MOE). Since education, particularly English education, is considered a key agenda for the general public, it is very often utilized for political motives. This tendency contributes to frequent issuing of new educational initiatives and to policy overload. Such overload has found to cause teachers to experience innovation fatigue, burn-out and high levels of stress and hinder teachers from seriously engaging in any of the newly added innovations (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Stronach & Morris, 1994), and the findings seem to equally apply to teachers in South Korea. The second characteristic, that is, the centralization of agenda setting and of regulation of the implementation of policies by the MOE, means that regional educational offices need to quickly adapt to these policies, at least at the design and implementation level. This centralization of major decisions has created more coherence in some agendas, such as building students' communicative competence, which has been pursued for the past two decades.

The teacher education and recruitment system are features that have consistently been reinforced by South Korea's English education policy. Strong teacher education and the rigorous procedure of teacher recruitment are often listed as possible contributors to South Korea's global competitiveness in education as measured by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (OECD, 2013). There are two ways to obtain certification to teach in a primary or secondary public school in South Korea. The first route is attending a 4-year education program at a college of education, a *Kyoyukdaehak* for the primary level and a *Sabeomdaehak* for the secondary level. The program covers both subject content and pedagogical theories and practice. If the candidate has undertaken a subject-focused Bachelor's degree, he or she needs to obtain additional education on pedagogy as a minor or double major in the BA program, or pursue an MA degree in an education-related subject.

Certification, however, only allows the applicants the opportunity to take the annual Teacher Recruitment Test in one of the 16 regional educational offices if they intend to work in public schools. The contents of the test are similar across those educational offices due to the requirement set by the MOE (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006) that has been in effect from 2009. For example, the recruitment procedure for English teachers must include a written test on educational theories in general, an English essay test, an English interview, and microteaching conducted in English. Since 2008, the government has recruited English related degree holders to specialize in teaching conversational English without going through this rigorous recruitment procedure. This has incurred disputes over deprofessionalization of teaching, particularly because in some schools these teachers are also asked to teach English in general, not just conversation. To teach English at a private school, depending on the individual schools' policy, a candidate either directly applies to a particular school with a vacancy or takes the annual Private Teacher Selection Test conducted by the Private Schools Association.

Finally, another larger context which frames English education is the national college entrance exam called Suneung or Korean Scholastic Ability Test (KSAT). South Korean education is suffering from a strong backwash from KSAT, due to a feverish zeal for higher education (Seth, 2002; Tak, 2011). With the English section of KSAT being focused on the receptive skills of listening and reading and grammatical knowledge, English teaching practice in schools also focuses on these rather than the productive skills of speaking and writing. The government, in an attempt to change the goal of English education from learning about English to learning to use it, designed and piloted a test called the National English Ability Test to replace the current English section of the KSAT. However, in 2013, it decided to defer its full implementation, due to the technical difficulties of testing a large number of students simultaneously, and due to the unexpected impact of causing further hikes in individual household's expenditures on English education.

## **4 English Education Policies in South Korea**

### ***4.1 Past English Education Policies***

To ascertain a deeper understanding of the present state of English teaching in South Korea, it is useful to look at how English teaching has evolved throughout the years. This history needs to be understood while taking into account the sociopolitical context. As Cooper (1989) argues, not only is language planning and language policy directly associated with political, economic and social considerations, but these "serve as the primary motivation" (p. 35). This section surveys curricular changes in English teaching, as reflected in the NEC after Korea's independence from Japanese occupation in 1948.

#### **4.1.1 The First NEC: 1953–1963**

After having been occupied by Japan for 35 years, Korea won its independence after Japan's defeat in World War II. However, while it may have become independent from Japan, the Korean peninsula was arbitrarily divided into two sides; the northern part aligned with the Soviet Union and China, and the southern part temporarily ruled by a US military administration. This situation led to the breakout of the Korean War. After an armistice was agreed to in 1953 the new South Korean government had a strong desire to eradicate vestiges of Japanese occupation and to reconstruct the country. These efforts towards reconstruction were supported by the US. This alignment with the US functioned as a major influence in the first NEC of modern South Korea. The first NEC was characterized by a strong allegiance to the US, exemplified by adopting American English as the standard form of English, and adopting pedagogies and educational philosophies that were in vogue in the US at that time, such as contrastive analysis and behaviorism, which was the basis for the Audio-lingual method (Choi, 2006; Lee, 2004).

#### **4.1.2 The Second and Third NEC: 1963–1981**

The 1960s and 1970s were substantially conducive in helping South Korea accomplish the level of development it has achieved today. President Park Jung-hee's authoritative military government, which quickly turned into a dictatorship, lasted for nearly 20 years until his assassination in 1979. President Park was strongly motivated to develop and modernize South Korea. The government's plans aiming at economic growth were forcefully pushed ahead, and a key part of it included cultivating South Korea's human resources.

In terms of English education, the MOE, the main actor in propelling the English education policies, came to acknowledge that instruction focused on grammar was not proving to be effective (Choi, 2006; Lee, 2004). Therefore, more emphasis was put on speaking and listening. This trend was short-lived and overturned by the third NEC when the government desired to strengthen its control over all aspects of the society, including education (Choi, 2006). The values of austerity and loyalty were highlighted, and instead of emphasizing communicative aspects of language learning, such as listening and speaking, as in the second NEC, the emphasis was switched back to grammar (Choi, 2006; Lee, 2004), and therefore creative or individual aspects of learning were restricted (Lee, 2004).

#### **4.1.3 The Fourth and Fifth NEC: 1982–1994**

After President Park's death, another military coup d'état placed President Chun Du-hwan in power. His government announced itself as a democratic state, although the authoritativeness of the previous government remained (Choi, 2006). This

political position was clearly reflected in the educational reforms that put weight on human-centeredness, autonomy and creativity. Significantly, the fourth NEC laid the foundation for primary English education. During this time, English was allowed to be taught as an extracurricular activity in primary schools for the first time. The rationale for this decision was to help primary level students develop an interest in English (Lee, 2004). At the secondary level, rather than focusing on one literacy skill, all four skills were emphasized and student-centered topics were introduced into the English teaching content. The hours of weekly English teaching in middle school were also increased. All of these changes were not independent of the preparation for the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. The Olympic Games were seen as a breakthrough opportunity for South Korea.

Immediately before the Olympics, a new president, Roh Tae-woo, was elected as the first president to have been elected by democratic vote, and his government was fixated on ridding South Korea of remnants of the long history of the military regime (Choi, 2006). Therefore, the fifth NEC emphasized ‘democratic’ aspects in education. In English, communicative aspects of language were again accentuated, and listening was formally incorporated into the college entrance exam. For the first time the government’s stronghold on textbooks was relatively loosened, and private publishers were allowed to develop English textbooks with the government’s authorization.

#### **4.1.4 The Sixth NEC: 1995–2000**

Entering the 1990s South Korea started to truly claim itself as a competent contender on the global stage, and this was also when many revolutions in English teaching were drafted (Kwon, 2000). These would eventually come into effect in the new millennium. President Kim Young-Sam, elected in 1992, was the first president to be elected from the opposition party. The government adopted globalization as a real goal for the near future of South Korea (Armstrong, 2007; Park, Jang, & Lee, 2007). The government’s globalization project was a “top-down reform to cope with the environmental uncertainty of the rapidly changing world” (Park et al., 2007, p. 342), and many changes were implemented in the name of globalization. However, as a result of this hurried globalization, the South Korean economy plummeted in 1997, eventually having to request a bail-out from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Against this backdrop, the sixth NEC was put into effect in 1995. The democratization efforts of the previous administration under President Roh Tae-Woo seemed to have had an effect in that by the sixth NEC, at least in rhetoric, individualism and human rights were underscored in education, and a practical approach to English teaching was embraced. Contrary to past curricula where communicative aspects such as speaking and listening were only emphasized in discourse, English teaching was now set on cultivating the communicative competence of students through methods suggested under the communicative approach (Choi, 2006; Kwon, 2000).



Fluency came to be emphasized over accuracy, comprehension became a focus over production in accordance to the tenets of the communicative paradigm, and a functional syllabus, as opposed to a structural, grammatical syllabus was adopted in textbooks. The hours per week devoted to English were also increased. It was at this time also that the South Korean government started to seek native-speaking English teachers from foreign countries by starting the ‘English program in Korea’ (EPIK). A discourse which urges language teaching at an early age (Choi, 2006) also emerged during this period.

## 4.2 *Current English Education Policies and the Seventh NEC*

The MOE’s long promoted goal of developing students’ communicative competence is still active in the current discourse of English education policies, as reflected in the recent series of multi-way plans such as *Yeongeog Gyoyuk Hwalseonghwa 5-Gaenyeon Jonghap Daechaek* [5-year Plan for Revitalization of English Education] in 2005, and *Yeongeog Gyoyuk Hyeoksin Bangan* [Innovation of English Education] (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006).

The seventh NEC was developed to achieve this long-term goal of building students’ communicative competence, and was announced in 1997. It was put into full effect by 2001 in primary and middle schools, and 2003 in high schools. The most noteworthy feature of this NEC was the introduction of English as a regular subject in primary schools, starting at the third grade level. Despite strong opposition, primary English was to be put into effect in all schools by 2001 (Kwon, 2000). The realization of this policy at this particular time was made possible because of the government’s globalization plans. A “Globalization Steering Committee” was formed in 1995 to design potential reforms (Lee, 2004), and it conceptualized foreign language competence as a key tool for South Koreans to actively participate in the global community. In the seventh NEC, the English curriculum continued to focus on communicative competence and the adoption of the communicative approach with everyday conversational English proficiency set as the goal. At the same time, contrary to the anti-grammar characteristic of the sixth NEC, a grammatical-functional syllabus was adopted in textbooks, acknowledging the recently reclaimed role of grammatical knowledge in language learning.

The infrastructure for English education was further reinforced. With the booming advancement of technology and the internet, a great amount of money was invested to make possible multimedia-assisted learning, and to incorporate the internet into teaching. ‘English villages’ that were meant to provide a short-term full-English-immersion experience to K-12 students came into existence in several provinces throughout South Korea. Many native English-speaking teachers were invited from abroad by the EPIK program and stationed in public schools. The government also allowed diversification in college admission procedures, and students excelling in English were granted automatic admission (Choi, 2006).

Finally, during this period, a general dissatisfaction with the educational climate in South Korea that still hovers around the high-stakes KSAT triggered an expansion in the private sector of education. More and more families, especially wealthy ones, sent their children off to English-speaking countries for a better education. These trends also resulted in widened gaps between classes, causing ever-deepening rifts between the haves, who have the resources to fully provide for their children's education and the have-nots, who have little choice but to rely on public school education. Acknowledging such emerging phenomena, the government encouraged the establishment of relatively affordable after-school programs for those who do not have financial resources to use on private sector education.

Section four clearly shows that English education policies in South Korea are not only results of purely educational concerns but also results of the government's appraisal of national needs. In particular, in recent decades globalization and securing national and individual competitiveness have become key agendas, with English proficiency appropriated as an indispensable tool within this framework. As mentioned in an earlier section, profit-seeking corporations and institutes of higher education have also been adopting this framework following the government's lead, and excellence in English has become a universal goal at all levels, and for most economically active South Koreans.

As explained above, the MOE sets the direction for education, but it is the regional educational offices which design and execute localized plans to realize these government-level policies. In many cases, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (SMOE) takes the initiative to present their own practical plans to implement the new policies instituted by the MOE and other regions use the practical plans of the SMOE as bench-marks for their own implementation of the policies. On this basis, the rest of the chapter which concerns the implementation of the policies instituted by the MOE will focus on policy implementation by SMOE and its practice within schools in Seoul.

## **5 Enactment of English Education Policies**

This section discusses two case studies, one from the primary level and the other from the secondary level, which showcase how the directives set by the MOE on developing students' communicative competence are implemented in practice. It also provides insights into why they bring on only modest changes in individual classrooms.

### ***5.1 Case Study of Primary English Education: Seventh National Educational Curriculum***

According to the English curriculum of the seventh NEC (MOE, 1997), English teaching at the primary level in South Korea aims to achieve the following overarching goals:

### Students should

- Have an interest and confidence in English, and develop the basic skills to communicate in English.
- Communicate naturally with others about daily life and general topics.
- Understand the variety of information coming from foreign cultures, and cultivate the ability to utilize such information.
- Develop a new recognition for our culture by understanding foreign cultures and develop righteous values.

The curriculum is presented to teachers in the form of official curriculum documents, a teaching guide that accompanies the curriculum documents, and textbooks, and it follows the tenets of the communicative approach and emphasizes arousing and maintaining motivation to learn English. The curriculum specifies what and how teachers should teach, along with how they should assess the learning of their students. The literacy skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading are introduced sequentially.

Currently, English teaching starts officially in the first semester of third grade, and begins with listening. More specifically, in the first semester of the third grade students are only required to learn English through listening, therefore the textbooks contain nearly no written text. Then in the second semester of third grade, the alphabet is introduced. Later, after fourth grade, reading and writing are introduced. For each grade and for each literacy skill, the curriculum sets forth standards that should be achieved. The following are the standards that should be achieved in listening, which is the only aspect of language skills that is focused on in the first two years as specified in the NEC:

- Students are able to understand simple conversations in daily life.
- Students are able to understand simple and easy English expressions about objects or people around them.
- Students are able to listen to and act upon one to two sentence instructions or orders.
- Students are able to listen to simple and easy conversations and figure out the location and time the conversation occurred.
- Students are able to understand the contents of simple and easy role plays.
- Students can listen to simple and easy explanations of tasks and carry out simple tasks at hand.

These standards are reflected in the textbooks. Overall, the use of chants, songs and activities in instruction is also emphasized and the textbooks generally have these implanted within the content. In instruction the curriculum recommends that teachers make efforts to use only English and differentiate their instruction as situations permit.

The case study presented here, of which data were collected in 2009, looked at how primary level English teachers in Seoul implemented the policy, the seventh NEC, through observations and interviews with the teachers. The data were collected for a larger study (Chung, 2011) that collected both qualitative and quantitative data looking into how primary level English teachers in Seoul implemented the English

curriculum. Interview data were thematically analyzed and classroom observations were conducted with an observation protocol and subsequently coded to find patterns within and between the teachers. The findings revealed that while in general the teachers all followed the guidelines and believed they should follow them, they also modified how to implement the curriculum according to their own understandings of the curriculum, their own beliefs in terms of English learning, and their surrounding contexts. More specifically, the teachers did adhere to the government's guidelines to teach communicatively. For example, a lot of games, chants, songs, and role play were incorporated into lessons, and most lessons consisted of student-centered group work. On the other hand, the teachers were not mechanically following the promoted practices. The following quote demonstrates how a teacher teaching third grade English responded to her dissatisfaction with the textbooks that were written to reflect the sequential fashion of introducing each literacy skill. She notes that she makes her own material based on the textbook, and also notes that because of the lack of written text in the textbook it is not easy for students to go home and review what they have learned.

The thing about the English subject is... since the textbooks don't have that much text... the teachers have to continue to develop worksheets. If the textbooks had the alphabet, key points and key sentences, then the students would be able to go home and review. However, because of the textbook, even if they want to self-study, they can't because the textbook is mainly pictures. There is the CD, but I feel like written language is not emphasized enough.

The teacher quoted below also shows how teachers use their discretion in enacting the curriculum. The seventh primary curriculum stresses that students should not feel a sense of pressure or anxiety due to assessment. It recommends formative assessment, as opposed to summative assessment so that results of assessment can help improve further teaching. It also promotes observational assessment. The report cards that students receive at the end of each semester do not give students a specific letter grade or score, but roughly indicate the students' performance by presenting marks such as 'good' or 'very good.' In the following quote, another third grade English teacher expresses the hardship she experiences in carrying out assessment, and explains that teachers can and will figure out their own methods of assessment depending on their circumstances.

It's not like we can do anything, I mean, we can't put anything else in the formal report cards, but I think teachers who teach English will in their own ways have their own methods of assessment. There will probably be individual differences, but if the teacher feels like he or she wants his or her students to take away some vocabulary, then they will.

The examples of the two teachers above demonstrate that while government guidelines are set up to be abided by and the teachers think they should abide by them, in practice, the teachers do what they feel is necessary in their own contexts, such as assisting students' self-study and informing students of their level of achievement. They understand the policy and implement the policy, but how they implement it depends on their own interpretations, re-creations and negotiations.

## 5.2 Case Study of Secondary English Education: Teaching English in English (TEE) Scheme

The direction of the current English education policies in secondary education can best be illustrated through the Teaching English in English (TEE) scheme. The TEE scheme certifies in-service English teachers who exhibit their abilities to conduct lessons in English in a communicative way. The scheme was instituted in 2010 nationally at both primary and secondary levels, benchmarking the TEE scheme which the SMOE started the year before. Part of the reasons for its institution is the perceived low take-up of the policy on communicative teaching at the individual classroom level. The scheme has been revised a few times since its institution, and some more changes are in plan which will be in effect from 2015. The scheme described below is the version which was in effect from the end of 2011 (2012 for the advanced level) and will be applied up to 2014 (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, 2011, 2012).

To briefly introduce the scheme, it is semi-voluntary in that all teachers with experience of 1 year or above are required to obtain the certificate, but there is no official disciplinary action against those who do not possess the certificate. The certification has two levels, basic and advanced. Before applying to receive the certification one needs to satisfy a prerequisite, a record of having attended at least 60 h of teacher training for the basic level and 600 h for the advanced level, heavily emphasizing continuous professional development. The certification procedure varies across the two levels. The basic level applicants should first attend an on-line educational program which discusses theories of language acquisition and some practical suggestions on how to teach English (e.g., teaching vocabulary). Then they are evaluated on their teaching on three different occasions. The advanced level candidates go through a much more rigorous process and also are required to fulfill more prerequisites. To apply for the advanced level, the candidate needs to have at least 10 years of teaching experience, and obtain recommendation from a head teacher, as well as a basic level TEE certificate. The candidates are assessed through interviews and portfolios on their ability to analyze and evaluate classes and mentor other teachers. Once they have passed these assessments, they receive an intensive training which prepares them to mentor other teachers.

The certification (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, 2012) presents developing students' communicative competence as the goal of English education, and emphasizes motivating students to learn. The promoted ELT is featured by the following four principles (*Ibid.*, p. 1) (as translated by the author):

- To maximize use of English, the target language, and utilize the mother tongue in an effective and flexible way;
- To ensure students' comprehension of the learning content and acquisition of English through communication;

- To ensure interactions between the teacher and the students and among students themselves in order to increase the opportunities to be exposed to language input; and
- To adopt student-centered task-based learning.

The principles again clearly reflect the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach which has been promoted from the sixth NEC, particularly Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) which is considered as ‘the current orthodoxy’ by some researchers of language educational pedagogy (e.g., Andon & Eckerth, 2009; Ur, 2013).

The case study presented below reports secondary school English language teachers’ responses to ELT promoted by the TEE scheme as well as the responses from the teacher trainers. The study draws on data which were collected for a larger study which was conducted between 2010 and 2012. The data collected for the larger study include the policy documents of the TEE certification and practical documents generated for the certification, such as the manuals for teachers and the teacher training resources; semi-structured interviews with stakeholders including 13 teachers, assessors, and teacher trainers; and observation of the certification procedure. Teacher participants included both those who applied for the certification and those who did not. (See Choi, 2014; Choi & Andon, 2014 for further details of the scheme, its implementation and impact). The case study in this chapter draws on document data and interviews with teachers and teacher trainers. Thematic content analysis was conducted on the entirety of the data.

Of the 13 teacher participants, ten discussed their plan about future practice. Of those ten, three expressed unreserved adoption of the practice that they thought was promoted by the TEE scheme, whether they thought the focus was on the use of English as the medium of instruction or on the use of communicative activities, or both. The others explicitly or implicitly were expressing their view that the promoted practice was not suitable to the context. One expressed flexible adoption of it. Three did not relate their future practice with the TEE scheme, but described their future practice in terms of the content to be covered (e.g., textbook or NEC) or of the ways to draw students’ attention (e.g., using attractive resources from the internet or giving feedback to students’ work), indirectly pointing out the gap between the CLT and the teaching context (e.g., the NEC or student needs). The remaining three actively expressed their intention to keep the traditional way of teaching, which is often featured as explicit explanation of grammatical rules and focus on receptive skills of reading and listening.

Interestingly, despite such varied responses, all explained their choices as the effective way to teach English or to address the needs of learners. The three who supported the promoted practice considered that the pedagogic change aimed by the TEE scheme is the right way to teach English, whether they are currently practicing it or not. The one who expressed flexible adoption thought the lesson should be customised to the changing needs of learners, which sometimes may involve using Korean as the medium of instruction despite the policy of maximization of English use. Those who did not engage with the discourse of CLT or English as the medium

presented preparation for the KSAT or responding to lack of motivation to learn English as addressing learner needs. Finally, those who avowed allegiance to the traditional way of ELT all explicitly commented on the perceived incompatibility between the content of the KSAT, which is of significant importance to students, and the promoted teaching style, as the following teacher did:

In senior high school, the students are under extreme pressure about the KSAT. Therefore, they want the teachers to go over the previous KSAT items, analyse them, and teach how to tackle them, the skills. And the TEE really doesn't work.

This teacher notes students' expectation to focus on the KSAT, which in turn pressures her to adhere to the traditional teaching style. All these responses from teachers show that teachers' perception of what constitutes effective ELT or addressing learner needs shape their practice in the classroom in response to the TEE scheme.

Perceptions of other actors such as the teacher trainers also shape the enactment of the TEE scheme. For instance, one of the teacher trainers of the training program for the advanced level asked teachers to aim at use of English for "5 % or 10 %" of their teacher talk rather than the official target of maximization of its use. During the interview, the trainer commented on his perception that the context is still unfavourable to adopting English as the medium despite the drastic change he observed during the past decade of his work experience in the context. The other factor which has kept a limited number of teachers from adopting the practice is their abilities. For instance, after a full month of intensive training a couple of participants still struggled to adopt the promoted practice, either due to their limited English proficiency or due to their limited understanding and/or abilities to realise communicative lessons (see Choi & Andon, 2014 for discussion of the manifestation of teachers' varied understanding of communicative teaching during the certification procedure). One participant comments on the difficulty she faces when she uses English as the medium even after she finished the whole certification procedure:

I think I should at least do things like teacher talk in English, but in fact, if you keep using English, you get to speak in English easily, but if not, [the words] do not come out. If I try to use it spontaneously, I end up thinking "What was it?"

Some of those teachers who experienced such difficulties during their attempt to adopt the promoted practice blamed their incompetence. Others, perhaps legitimately, complained about the unreasonable expectation for teachers to adopt the practice right away after the short-term training through the certification process.

This case study of the TEE scheme in secondary education shows the central role played by teachers' beliefs and perceptions in deciding their responses to the policy initiatives, which is explored in depth in Glasgow and Paller (2015) in this volume. The teachers made varied pedagogic decisions in response to the TEE scheme based on their perception of the compatibility between the practice promoted by the scheme and their views of effective teaching. They also considered self-evaluated English proficiency in such decisions.

To conclude this section, the snapshot of teachers' views presented through the two case studies reveal several tensions in context regarding English education. In consideration of the general public's interest in enhancing English proficiency and

also to fulfil the government's agenda to elevate South Korea's status on the global stage by making all South Koreans into proficient English users, the government continues its efforts to make English teaching to be communication-oriented. Nonetheless, the teachers' accounts show that teachers act on their own agenda of significance, which is meeting the needs of students, whether that is assisting students' learning the language or passing the college entrance exam. This results in a variety of practices employed by teachers. As Ball et al., (2012) have depicted through their research, teachers are bound by policy, but in translating the policies into their own practice they also emerge as policy and decision makers in their own right. After all, "language education policies are the joint product of the educators' constructive activity, as well as the context in which this constructive activity is built" (Menken & García, 2010, p. 256). In other words, the end-product of language education policies results from a co-construction between the teachers who teach by and with the policies, and the various contextual factors that exist in their teaching environments. The findings also show that the English language education in South Korea can be seen as a case of linguistic imperialism that is warned against by some scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007), as ELT related policies borrowed ideas of ELT pedagogy such as CLT and TBLT and presented them as the best approaches to ELT perhaps without really examining their compatibility with the context. However, teachers, as change agents, were exerting their own agency based on their local expertise and knowledge, and thus were resisting such imperialism, if any, with or without their self-awareness.

## 6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have contextualized and described the past and present of South Korea's English education policies. Within a century, South Korea has been able to transform itself from an underappreciated developing country to a trendsetting economic leader. Education, and to larger degrees in recent decades, English education, arguably, have made major contributions in propelling this growth. In effect the South Korean government has appropriated the English language as an essential element in helping South Korea and its people to successfully interact with international communities and raise their visibility around the globe. Its English education policies have been constructed based on the government's assessment of what is necessary for this end. Consequently, following the government's lead, other institutions have also embraced English, and now South Korea as a whole has an intense fervor for the language. Since the 1990s the South Korean government has been aggressively pushing its globalization agenda, and within this framework English has come to be introduced at the primary level of schooling, and a communicative approach to ELT has been endorsed through various initiatives at all levels.

The case studies presented here investigate the degree to which this policy direction has bearing on actual practice as perceived by educational practitioners, particularly teachers. The teachers in both of the case studies agreed to the policies in



principle, but found the details of the policies rather incompatible with the context. For example, the sequential introduction of literacy skills and the recommended methods of assessment at the primary level, and the CLT approach and using English as the medium of instruction at the secondary level were aspects of the policy that teachers found problematic. Consequently, the teachers would choose to implement the policies in their own ways, depending on their unique contexts and their beliefs. In addition, policy actors in the South Korean context were exerting their agency rather than becoming blind adopters of Western-born pedagogical ideas, although their resistance was not always explicit, perhaps due to the influence of the oft-blamed culprit of Confucianism. Culture-bound acts of resistance toward curricular reforms informed by ideas borrowed from other contexts seem to request further research.

The accounts of these teachers and the trainers can have several implications for future policy making and practice. The translation from policy to practice is a convoluted and organic process that involves the interpretations and negotiations of all actors, particularly teachers and teacher trainers as mentioned in the second case study. The understanding that the procession from policy to practice is, as such, multifaceted and dynamic should be established in order for such policies to make any impact. English education policies, and language education policies in general, should not be seen simply as top-down or bottom-up, but interactive (Ball et al., 2012; Menken & García, 2010). The two case studies above show that the teachers, being the actual policy executors, have central significance in determining the outcomes of the policies. Ensuring that feedback from teachers is an imperative and organic element in the policy making and implementation process would enhance the success and satisfaction of all stakeholders in English education, most important of them all, the students.

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