
RESEARCH ARTICLE

English Language Teachers in South Korea: Issues of Whiteness and Native-speakerness

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the status and identity of teachers of English as a foreign language in South Korea. In many parts of the world, English is taught as a second, foreign, or additional language. The status of native and non-native English-speaking teachers is debated often. However, the dichotomy is not as straightforward as it might appear because the difference between native and non-native speakers does not sufficiently describe the identities, linguistic abilities, and teaching skills that those teachers possess. Cho (2012) described two critical considerations for male Korean-American teachers of English in South Korea: (1) linguistic capital and the ideal of native English speakers in Asian countries and (2) the social status and identity of Asian-Americans as members of minority groups in the United States. In order to transcend the idealisation of the West and to support learners and teachers in South Korea, this paper discusses issues of whiteness and native-speakerness in relation to the two issues that Cho described by examining the backgrounds and characteristics of Korean Americans as well as English-as-a-foreign-language education in South Korea. In addition, the paper discusses the teaching experience and the abilities of English teachers. The analysis identifies the benefits and risks of commodifying linguistic capital. The findings contribute to the developments of English-language education not only in East Asian countries but also in the rapidly globalising world of the modern age, in which English competence is more valuable than ever.

KEYWORDS

Native-speakerism, Whiteness, English teacher, Korean-American

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1. Introduction

In today's rapidly globalising world, not only goods and information but also people move across borders. As a result, English is spreading as a *lingua franca* in various fields such as international business, information technology, academia and transportation, giving this language prestige. In Asian countries, an increasing number of people are learning English to compete in the global market. As English language proficiency is highly valued and English is treated as a commodity, migrants in English-speaking countries sometimes return to the countries their ancestors came from with their linguistic capital of English, expecting to find jobs. Although these return migrants enjoy the privilege of using their capital, they face the issue of native-speakerness in their host countries while also experiencing anxiety about returning to their 'real' home and reconstructing their life there as minorities. In this paper, I discuss the issues of return migrants and their identity as English speakers in response to Cho's (2012) paper regarding Korean-American male English teachers in South Korea. Herein, I critically analyse the backgrounds of Korean migrants, their linguistic capital of English and English as a commodity in South Korea to identify the salient characteristics of this population. I also discuss the issues of ethnicity and teaching abilities in relation to English as a foreign language (EFL) education.

2. English Language Teachers in South Korea

In his article, Cho (2012) reveals two critical issues: 1) linguistic capital and ideal native English speakers in Asian countries, and 2) the social status and identity of Asian-Americans as members of minority groups in the United States (US). He demonstrates how Korean-American male English teachers relish their life using the linguistic capital of English in South Korea, while at the same time

struggling with going back to the US where their linguistic capital and male Koreanness would not be valued. In a neo-Confucian Korean society, where men have more power than women and teachers are respected, Korean-American males often find well-paid English teaching jobs easily due to their English proficiency and recover their sense of masculinity and social status. However, their teaching positions are insecure, often with one-year contracts; they are restricted to teaching at so-called 'SAT institutes' which prepare students to take the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) and study at universities in the US; and their wages are lower than their white male counterparts' wages. In addition, they are occasionally regarded as 'failed immigrants and inauthentic English speakers' because people have suspicions about their returning to South Korea from the US, where many Koreans yearn to go (Cho, 2012: 226). Moreover, there is the perception that only white speakers are native English speakers, whereas Korean-Americans, in the view of the Korean government, are considered 'bilingual global citizens' (Cho, 2012: 220). Cho also reveals Korean-American male English teachers' concerns about reconfirming and reconstructing their identity when they return to the US, and their emotional dilemma of whether to start a new career in the US or stay in South Korea without any prospects of success. They lose their privilege as Korean men, are marginalised again because of their race or ethnicity and their linguistic capital of English is devalued in the US. They are a linguistic and cultural minority with little Korean language proficiency and a Westernised upbringing, they have few opportunities to advance in their career, and consider their stay in South Korea as temporary and inauthentic. However, they defer their return to the US because of their anxiety towards transitioning back into American society and feel stuck in South Korea. Cho argues that there are 'opportunities and risks of capitalizing on English' (Cho, 2012: 232) and concludes that self-development is vital for all classes in a neoliberal globalising world.

3. Korean-Americans and their Backgrounds

Korean-Americans are a recent immigrant group in American society. There have been three waves of Korean migration to the US. The first was in the early 1900s, when more than 7,000 Koreans arrived in Hawaii as labourers, mainly at sugar plantations (Shin, 2005). These early immigrants had strong emotional ties to their homeland and had no intention of settling down permanently. The second was the post-Korean war period, when approximately 77% of Korean immigrants were wives of American servicemen or war orphans (Shin, 2005). The third wave is the mass migration that has occurred since the changes in US immigration laws in 1965. A majority of new migrants are from the educated middle class in South Korea, and come to the US with their families (Jo, 1999). Out of over one million Koreans in the US today, over two-thirds have arrived since 1970 (Shin, 2005).

Korean immigration to the US has increased since the 1970s for many reasons. The relaxation of laws in both the US and South Korea pushed those people to emigrate who wished to flee from oppression under a military dictatorship (1961–1987), wanted better economic opportunities and saw America as a land of opportunity and freedom. For recent migrants, education is a primary motivation. In a Confucian society, good education leads to economic prosperity and a high social status; however, competition to enter top universities in South Korea is fierce. Therefore, wealthy families move to the US to provide their children with better opportunities (Hurh, 1998). In addition, the popularity of English in South Korea and the people's desire to speak English fluently without a foreign accent should be noted. In South Korea, English competence is highly valued. Demick (2002) observes that the interest in learning English has become stronger since the Asian financial crisis of 1997, when people realised their weakness in competing in a global market. The government encourages EFL education and emphasises the importance of acquiring communicative competence in English. As a result, private English conversation schools are mushrooming in urban areas. Despite the government's promotion of English and parents' efforts to have their children master it, the English proficiency of Koreans is not sufficient in terms of international standards. According to the Educational Testing Service (2011), Koreans ranked tenth in Asia in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Accordingly, families with sufficient savings send their children to the US to learn English (Park and Wee, 2012).

4. English as Commodity

The number of Korean immigrants to the US has declined in recent years owing to changes in US immigration laws. The United States Census Bureau (2012) indicates that Koreans who obtained permanent resident status dropped from 338,800 during 1981–1990 to 22,200 in 2010. However, the number of Koreans who return to South Korea has increased. The number of Korean-Americans in South Korea was approximately 26,000 in 2008 (Cho, 2012), compared with approximately 800 in 1980 (Belluck, 1995: cited in Shin, 2005). The reasons for return migration may be due to the development of the South Korean economy, racial discrimination and the struggle to maintain a business in the US or a 'whim'. In addition, the commodification of English in South Korea, in which EFL teaching, textbooks and tests are a huge business, may be a factor, as Korean-Americans can use their linguistic capital of English to find jobs. Park and Wee (2012) discuss the intense pursuit of EFL acquisition on the national level. Cho (2012) examines the state-led 'globalisation drive' that has led to the mass import of Korean-American English teachers to South Korea since the mid-1990s. However, as Cho (2012) points out, Korean-American English teachers are categorised as inauthentic English speakers, marginalised in EFL educational contexts and sometimes labelled as failed migrants.

5. Linguistic Capital of English

There are individual differences in English competences among Korean-Americans. Shin (2005) discusses the low level of English proficiency among first-generation Korean immigrants. A majority of foreign-born Korean-Americans live in urban areas such as New York City and Los Angeles and maintain close relationships within their ethnic communities. Due to these ties, nearly 40% of those in New York City do not speak English well or 'at all' (Asian American Federation of New York, 2002, cited in Lew, 2006). Yet, second- and 1.5-generation Korean-Americans (Koreans who were born in South Korea but raised in the US during adolescence) are likely to be native English speakers. Studies of language maintenance and shifts show that a complete shift to the dominant language occurs within three generations without any special effort (Fishman, 1989). However, minority languages are likely to undergo a complete shift within two generations (Wiley, 2001). In addition, as explained earlier, Korean families place a high value on education. Korean-Americans also have the same attitude towards education (Jo, 1999). Therefore, English proficiency is essential if their children are to succeed academically in the US. As a result, children's dominant language tends to shift to English when they start school, although their parents may wish them to retain their heritage language (Shin, 2005). In a study of Korean-American college students' language competences, the participants who were born in the US or arrived in the US before school age reported that they were more comfortable speaking English than Korean (Cho and Krashen, 1998). Furthermore, Lee (1991) explains that fluency in English affords a high status among Koreans in the US. From these analyses, we can assume that Korean-Americans who come to South Korea as English teachers are native or have native-like fluency in English. Why then are they not viewed as authentic English speakers despite their having the same linguistic capital of English as their white counterparts? The Korean-American English teachers interviewed in Cho's study had good educational backgrounds and linguistic competence. It can be argued that Korean people's perceptions that 'native English speakers are Caucasians' influences their view of English-speaking Korean-Americans.

6. Issues of Whiteness and Native-speakerness

It cannot be denied that certain privileges relate to whiteness. Korean-Americans have experienced widespread racial discrimination in the US (Takaki, 1989). Lew (2006) interviewed Korean-American high school students and revealed that they were racially marginalised as foreigners or non-Americans despite being born and raised in the US. He also illustrates that Korean parents emphasise that their children should use their education to compensate for racial barriers they face in the US. Both parents and children understand the obstacles and the importance of adjusting to American culture. In particular, middle-class Korean-American students interpret becoming 'American' as achieving an economic status equivalent to that of middle-class White Americans (Lew, 2006). Despite Korean immigrants' relatively high levels of education compared with average Americans, their family income is the second lowest compared with other Asian groups in the US (Park, 1999). As the economy has advanced in South Korea, some Korean-Americans have returned there to work as English teachers. However, they still face the issue of not being white in the EFL market in South Korea.

Notions of native-speakerness and the idealised native English speaker exist. Regardless of their native or native-like English competency, teachers who do not fit into the white middle-class norms are marginalised in EFL teaching contexts in South Korea. This tendency is seen not only in Korean society but also in other Asian countries such as China and Taiwan. Koreans conventionally believe that white monolingual English speakers are automatically equipped with standard English. However, studies conducted in the United Kingdom indicate that this is not always the case and that many white pupils use nonstandard forms of English by choice (Hudson and Holmes, 1995; Leung, Harris and Rampton, 1997). Moreover, as a variety of dialects subsists within English-speaking countries and there is no standard form of English, there is no one 'perfect' or 'proper' model of English.

The issue of whiteness is also seen in general educational settings in the US. While the number of students from various racial backgrounds has been increasing, the teachers remain predominantly white in elementary and secondary schools (White, 2012). Furthermore, the marginalisation of non-native English teachers or teachers with an accent can be observed. The Arizona Department of Education issued a policy which removes teachers with an accent from English as a second language (ESL) classes (Blum and Johnson, 2012), although there is no direct connection between 'being a native speaker' and 'having teaching skills'. Obviously, the native-English speaker myth, or native-speakerness, is still a powerful issue in many parts of the world, and questioning the norms of the dominant culture presents a challenge. TESOL International Association (2006) clearly states that 'English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along on a continuum of professional preparation' rather than based on a teacher's native language. Medgyes (1994) claims that non-native English teachers can facilitate their learners' language development as they have experience in learning English themselves. Therefore, instead of looking at ethnicity or seeking an idealised native English speaker, it is important to consider English language proficiency and the teaching ability of teachers.

7. Teaching experience and ability

The notion of native-speakerness excludes Korean-American teachers from EFL educational contexts without considering their real language competence. It is essential to examine teachers' actual skills and not their ethnicity. Widdowson (1994) argues that

training and skills are necessary to be a competent language teacher. Unquestionably, knowledge and teaching skills are developed through not only teacher pre-service courses but also the experiences of being a student and teaching. Wallace (1991) claims that teaching ability is received knowledge integrated with experiential knowledge. Richards and Nunan (1990: 201) argue that 'experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, and that experience coupled with reflection is a much more powerful impetus for development' for teachers. Thus, teacher training and qualifications, along with experience, are important in proving their knowledge and ability to teach a target language as our skills are judged by others, not by ourselves. None of Cho's (2012) research participants had EFL/ESL teaching qualifications, and they use only their linguistic capital of English to find jobs. However, they need not only linguistic but also other capital to compete in the market in English-speaking countries, and it is helpful if they can utilise the experience and skills they acquired in South Korea. They may still face the issue of whiteness; however, by proving their credibility as EFL/ESL teachers, they could enhance their symbolic capital and compete in the job market.

8. Conclusion

Globalisation has accelerated international migration and spread English as a *lingua franca* around the world. Cho (2012) reveals not only issues related to return migration and the linguistic capital of English but also how a sojourn in a host country affects the identity formation of Korean-Americans and their views of their 'real' home. Despite their limited opportunities and insecure job contracts, Korean-American male English teachers appreciate life in South Korea and may defer returning to their home. Three factors could be related to their dilemma: the privileges they have as male English speakers in South Korea, the issue of whiteness in the US, and the potential devaluation of their linguistic capital in their 'real' home.

Park (1999: 50) describes the Confucian tradition in Korean society as male centred, and as having a superior-inferior relationship which is 'extended to interfamily and intrafamily relations according to age, sex, generation, and social relations', and values education. Korean-American male English teachers have advantages in South Korea due to their gender, linguistic capital and social status as English teachers. They feel that life in South Korea is easier than in the US, although they sense their 'otherness' because they lack fluency in the Korean language and culture. They may find it difficult to start a new career in the US, as their English ability is not viewed as special there. As a result, they face the dilemma of either staying South Korea or returning to the US. It is ironic that although some Koreans have migrated to the US with the dream of achieving economic success, they nevertheless feel marginalised in American society; their children return to the homeland to teach English to those who share the same dream.

Cho (2012) also identifies the issue of idealised native English speakers in Asian countries and the risks of commodifying English. As ethnicity and language competence are not always related, the notion of native-speakerness that exists in our culture needs to be changed. It is unclear whether the white counterparts of Cho's participants have teaching qualifications or have taken teacher-training courses. Thus, we cannot determine whether Korean-Americans are discriminated against based on their ethnicity or teaching qualifications. I believe further research should be conducted to fully understand the relation between teachers' ethnicity and the discrimination in EFL educational contexts. Cho's study shows as well that EFL education is a business, and that English competence can be an economic capital. However, we need not only language skills but also other skills to compete in the job market.

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