

Disembark from the Same Boat (Shin-eiken and KETG)

Under neo-liberalism-plagued education climate, and
---Pave the way to students- oriented English language education policy

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Abstract

English language teachers in Japan and South Korea are challenged with exploring new methods in the neo-liberalism-plagued education climate, which has brought unprecedented difficulties in their doing daily classwork. Those difficulties are due to government's forcible implementation of teaching guidelines (*courses of study*) which entails an unbearable workload (longer working hours which are feared to incur *karoshi*), mandatory training which is of no benefit from the viewpoints of teachers on the ground, and etc.

First this paper refers to the history of Shin-eiken (or *New English Teachers Association*) and KETG (Korean English Teachers Group), which have maintained close relationships in terms of English language education for 16 years. Next, it reveals challenges faced by the two organizations, and lastly explores ways toward a student-oriented English language education policy.

Introduction

First of all, I'd like to give a brief history of both organizations:

KETG: Founded by eight secondary English teachers in Seoul in the summer of 1988, the KETG (Korean English Teachers' Group) started as a professional book discussion group. The teachers gathered over weekends at a female teacher's home to discuss professional books or sets of articles mainly focused on educational philosophy and sociology. At that time they were teachers' labor union activists and advocates for social change. KETG faced a difficult time when the South Korean government suppressed the teachers' movement for creating a teacher's union in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. During the turbulent social educational movement over 1,500, some of whom were KETG members, were fired and dozens of them even went to jail. With the legalization of the National Labor Union of Teachers in July 1999, KETG emerged as the national grassroots professional organization of Korean English teachers. The membership is mainly secondary school English teachers, but also includes elementary English teachers, university professors, graduate students and prospective English teachers. The steering committee consists of five teams: Editing, Internet, Teacher Development, Advertisement, and Membership. The teachers have weekly steering committee meetings and hold seminars for newly formed teacher study groups. They also hold workshops twice a year in February and July. The July workshop is designed to enhance English knowledge and skills in collaboration with the nation's Ministry of Education

Shin-eiken: New English Teachers Association or *Shin-eiken* came into being in 1959 as a professional English teachers group to explore ways of democratic and scientific teaching methods and to discuss challenges they faced. Pioneering teachers of that time gathered at schools on weekends and engaged in heated arguments over tasks and challenges arising from their daily teaching work. In April 1959, they

started to publish a monthly magazine carrying teaching practices and exchanging opinions on their classwork. Since then, the membership has increased year after year because numerous teachers wanted to share their teaching experiences and find better ways to teach. With the surging English education reform campaign by the business world in the 1990s aimed at developing “globally-minded human resource” based on neo-liberalism and linguistic instrumentalism, the education ministry launched new policies such as forcing “English-only class,” and urging students to take tests of the STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency), a test set by a private English educational body. In addition, the ministry even has compelled teachers to take exams in TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) or TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language).

On August 12th, 2001, 12-member Shin-eiken delegation visited the KETG office in Seoul, and the heads of the both bodies issued a joint communique pledging mutual collaboration of research, and exchanged a letter of agreement. Since then, some 16 years have passed, and we saw favorable progress in accordance with the agreement as exemplified by sending both delegation to each other’s yearly national-level convention.

With neo-liberalism and linguistic instrumentalism raging in Korea and Japan, teachers have been forced to go through hardships in their daily teaching work. This paper refers to the existing difficulties they face, and shows possible avenues to overcome them by improving their working conditions, thereby guaranteeing adequate academic capabilities to every student.

1. Neo-liberalism and linguistic instrumentalism

“Linguistic instrumentalism” is defined as an ideology that emphasizes utilitarianism of learning English for sustaining economic development of a society. In this sense, English is a tool that supports a nation’s competitiveness in the global market which results in the utilitarianism of learning English at the society level in order to sustain economic development. English as linguistic instrumentalism is particularly evident in education policies in Japan (and in other nations including Korea), and has resulted in an emphasis on English Language Teaching (ELT) and English curriculum reforms. Linguistic instrumentalism underscores the importance of English skills for employment opportunities in terms of economic success. It has also influenced Japanese language and teaching in Japan and the employment conditions of a neoliberal society.

“Neoliberalism” can be defined as a revisionist approach to transform the welfare state into a post-welfare state that relegates all aspects of society to the wisdom of the market. Neoliberalism usually adopts a “trickle-down hypothesis” in which economic benefits gathered by upper groups of the society will benefit poorer members of the society by improving the economy as a whole. Neoliberalism has been a dominant paradigm for social reform for the past few decades mainly in the world of economy, but it is expanding in terms of its influence in other areas including education. Examples of linguistic instrumentalism or neoliberalism permeating into areas of English education around the globe are reported by an increasing number of scholars. For example, in **South Korea**, English implies a promise of social inclusion in the sense that reaching certain goals of measurable competence in the language is assumed to provide economic and social advancement.

In **Japan**, the Japan Federation of Economic Organization (*Keidanren*) and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (*Keizai Doyukai*) have proposed that the government improve oral communicative skills of students in primary, secondary, and higher education. The plans and policies released by the Ministry

of Education have reflected these corporate demands.

The ministry's policy is motivated by neoliberal goals from the Abe administration, i.e., "Abenomics." Abenomics is a neoliberal approach characterized by "deregulation, reduction of fiscal deficit, and free trade".

In order to promote the establishment of an education environment which corresponds to globalization from the elementary lower/upper secondary education stage, the ministry is working to enhance English education substantially throughout elementary to lower/secondary school by strengthening English education in elementary schools.

Timed with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, in order for the full-scale development of new English education in Japan, the ministry further promoted education reform from FY2014 including constructing a framework based on the following plan.

- Elementary school (Third and Fourth grade): "English Language Activities classes" are given 1 or 2 times a week to nurture the foundations for communication skills.
- Elementary school (Fifth and Sixth grade): "Regular English Language classes 2 times a week to nurture basic English language skills.

The ministry presents English in fifth and sixth grade elementary school education as "English Language (Subject) classes 2 times a week." It distinguishes "class teachers with good English skills," where "good" is determined by passing Grade pre-1 in Practical English Proficiency (*EIKEN*), or scoring over 80 on the TOEFL iBT (Test of English as a Foreign Language, Internet-Based Test). This dependency upon testing is a characteristic of linguistic instrumentalism.

- Junior High School: English classes are designed to nurture the ability to understand familiar topics, carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English. Classes should be conducted in English in principle.

Given that the 2020 Olympics is a "trigger" to promote tourism in Japan, the ministry aims to equip students to become capable of presenting the Japanese identity to the world. It also tries to show that Japan is a unified nation and that Japanese culture, tradition, and identity are unique to citizens of Japan.

The ministry aims to revise teaching guidelines (the Course of Study) beginning in 2018, while "full scale implementation" throughout Japan is expected to begin in 2020 with the intention of being "timed with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics."

As it is explicitly stated, the English Education Reform Plan is directly linked to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, as announced by the IOC (International Olympic Committee) in 2013, shortly before the plan was implemented. The Japanese government expects economic growth by hosting such a big event. Since Tokyo won the bid to host the 2020 Summer Olympic Games last September, various think tanks have announced their estimates of the economic effects of the Olympics, with figures of tens of ¥trillions.

As part of the growth strategies in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "Abenomics," the government is aiming to increase the number of foreign visitors per year to 20 million by 2020 and 30 million by 2030. The ministry's plan to reform English education is motivated by Abenomics' growth strategies and neoliberal goals that include using the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as an opportunity for economic growth through emphasizing tourism in its "Discover Tomorrow" slogan.

The Olympics has not always resulted in economic stimulus: e.g., Greece went bankrupt after the 2004

Olympics and the Winter Olympics in Nagano in 1998 did not result in stimulation. But the 2012 Olympics in London resulted in a stronger economy, and this is the hope of the Japanese government. The ministry expects students to use English to tell the world about Japanese culture and history in the hope that the Olympics is the trigger for them to come to Japan.

Despite incisive criticism from many researchers, the current neoliberal logic of capitalism is too deep-rooted to stop the English frenzy. In many Asian countries, English teaching reform has been intensely prompted by the government with strong influence from the business sector. Large corporations look at workers' competence in English as a criterion for employment and promotion, and emphasize the importance of English in a globalizing world. For example, the domestic market of South Korea is much smaller than many Asian countries, so the government and businesses began English education reform much earlier to compete in the globalizing world. As a result, many students and workers have invested much time and money in developing their skills in the language.

2. A few concerns of the ongoing "reform"

I would like to point out a few concerns about the ongoing reform. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal goals in English education policy in Japan. It is also to provide policy makers and practitioners engaged in English education with viewpoints to see the current situation from wider perspectives.

First, if a state seeks to strengthen its economic power by increasing the number of fluent English speakers to compete in the global marketplace, the desire can be reflected in English teaching curricula. The students taught through the curricula are made to desire English communicative fluency. A ready-made workforce for the economy can be produced in this way. Teachers' desires are also subject to be manipulated, as we have tried to demonstrate through such pervasiveness, and they might be assisting the neoliberal ideology unconsciously or unknowingly not by educating human beings, but by creating human resources to develop the economy.

Second, required 'skills' are also manipulated. For example, TOEIC used to be the test of choice for many corporations in South Korea in the 1990s, and a large industry was created including material developers and private schools. Once it was found that a high TOEIC score did not translate into good competence in English, corporations began to abandon TOEIC as an assessment tool. This change occurred over a 10-year period. This example shows that the definition of 'skills' can be ideologically controlled by power. These days, it is 'communicative skills' that are presented as being required skills, although as we have seen, 'communicative skills' are not clearly defined. The power that reproduces the structure of the linguistic market continues to revise the concept of 'skills,' which leads students or workers to perpetually pursue the imagined skills they believe they need at a given time.

The third concern is educational inequality. We can find widening disparity in the allocation of educational resources including public investment, qualified teachers, and school facilities in China. Fees that students pay and salaries that teachers are paid are much higher at prestigious schools than others. What we need is a more careful analysis and criticism to understand the mechanisms of the linguistic market and how the structure is reorganized to maintain or accelerate the social inequality.

The last point is about how teachers in the frontline can fill gaps they face. Teachers in Asian countries

who have typically acquired only a reading comprehension ability in English have to prepare students to pass English exams. However, students, parents, and school principals often demand that teachers produce exceptional results. On the other hand, governments in many non-English-speaking countries have issued policies aimed at improving oral communicative skills by calling for the use of English for instruction and hiring more native English speakers as assistant English teachers (ALT). As we have seen in the reform plan, governments merely encourage students to study abroad by offering financial aid. If teachers on the ground follow the policies, they have to prepare many supplementary lessons, which are typically for reading comprehension and not usually aimed at improving oral proficiency. Not all English teachers can do so because school teachers have many other obligations. In that case, many students may have to go to a cram school or hire a tutor to win competitions to enter prestigious universities or go abroad by way of government sponsored programs. Students who cannot afford supplementary support are likely to be left behind.

To sum up, I would like to point out that linguistic instrumentalism does not always contribute to individual economic success despite high English proficiency gained by spending enormous amounts of time and money, such as in the case of the reform plan. In most cases the promise of fluency in English is an illusion. Further, almost all workers engaged in English-related clerical work are temporary staff in spite of their good command of English. In Japan, employers who are required to negotiate in English are often limited, and professional knowledge and skills in one's specialized field rather than English skills are regarded as being most essential by corporate executives. As a result, although the ministry intends to promote English and use the 2020 Olympics as a "trigger" to promote a reformed English education program in Japan, the value of English as linguistic instrumentalism is difficult to determine and may not produce the results that the Abe Administration is hoping for.

3. Harmful effects of Neo-liberalism and linguistic instrumentalism

Today a lot of Japanese teachers in the frontline have been afflicted with numerous harmful effects deriving from the two phenomena. They have a demanding, high stress work situation, and do not have favorable working conditions and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

(1) Unbearable increasing workload

The headline on a Japan's major newspaper dated April 28th in 2017 astonished the people. It read: "School teachers 'scream over' overworking." According to the results of a nationwide fact-finding survey on school teachers' working hours by the Ministry of Education, 60 percent of Japanese junior high school teachers and 30 percent of elementary school teachers are on the road to "*karoshi* (death from overworking)." The high figure is said to be attributable to increasing classwork and extracurricular activities. Unlike in western countries, Japanese teachers have to engage in after school instruction of students in their extracurricular activities, e.g. sports and other clubs. Even on weekends, they are required to come to school to supervise club activities.

(2) Coercion of uniform teaching guidelines

The ministry decides teaching guidelines (officially "Course of Study"), and imposes them on teachers. They have no choice but to teach kids English in compliance with the guidelines. The worst example of this can be seen in the form of "English-only class."

The released teaching guidelines of English for junior high school stipulate that teachers should teach

classes using English “in principle.” But the words “in principle” are so similar to ‘mandatory’ that this confuses teachers on the ground. In reality, they currently have to teach through devising a variety of means to have kids understand the subject.

(3) Stronger control on teachers

Teachers usually work under circumstances with minimal autonomy. Top-down decision making is thoroughly imposed at school (especially at public schools). Taking a vote for or against is not allowed at teachers’ meetings. Rank and file teachers can attend teachers’ meetings and voice opinions on various school’s policy and activities, but they cannot decide it (take a vote). A school principal and senior or core teachers usually explain these matters to the teachers in general, and just give them an “opportunity” to say his or her view. The principal himself “makes a final decision.” The word “school autonomy” which used to work decades ago is now “dead” (obsolete).

In short, Japanese teachers in general have been afflicted with working on weekends, longer working hours, teaching guidelines compliance, and mandatory participation in “ministry-organized training,” doing a lot of paperwork (writing documents solely for the district board of education), etc. Who can have their school children acquire an abundant academic performance under these circumstances?

4. Disembark from the “same boat” and pave the way to “Students-centered”/ Learning for all” classes

As stated above, to explore a way for student-oriented English education seems extremely hard for us in the current climate of Neo-liberalism and linguistic instrumentalism. But I don’t think we should give up. We should explore ways to embody our own ideas by some means or other. We have a keen interest in “Differentiated Instruction,” which has been implemented as national-level education curriculum in advanced western countries. In contrast, the “entrance-exam first” classwork or “rote learning-centered” education is still raging in South Korea. KETG consider “Learning for All”, “Universal Design for Learning,” and “One Size Doesn’t Fit All” their guidelines, and has begun to explore innovation of education lately.

With the advent of South Korea’s new president Moon Jae-in, the new government has been pushing forward with innovative education policies, as exemplified by abolition of entrance exam-oriented schools including foreign language secondary schools, and uniform periodic exams such as mid-term and term exams. Activity-centered class, project-based classes, cooperative learning, and ICT-aided classes, student-centered strategic classes and others, which KETG have devised, have been extensively carried out around the country. Differentiated Instruction is, as it were, a “summation of classwork” that KETG have pursued for many years. KETG teachers has begun “full-fledged” use of the DI toward grand-design of “Learning for all.”

In Japan, a traditional teaching method of “English grammar-based translation and reading comprehension” have been conducted for over 150 years. But the negative side of the method has brought “English-phobia,” and declining academic capability, due to the ministry’s “communicative English”-biased teaching method for these decades. Erikawa Haruo, Wakayama University professor, asserts that “its merits are boosting student’ reading comprehension, helping English grammar take root for students, and training students’ Japanese and thinking power, while its demerits are found in poor input/sound instruction, and scant linguistic activities, therefore teachers should use the method carefully.” Today, we

should pursue a well-balanced teaching method combining several kinds of methods

Shin-eiken sticks to “four aims of foreign language education.” The policy originally was initiated in 1962, and was partially amended in 1970 and 2001. The one given below is the established one, which has been handed down to date.

- (1) Promote understanding, interaction, and solidarity with people all over the world for the sake of world peace, ethnic harmony, democracy, and defending human rights, and preservation of environment through learning foreign languages
- (2) Nurture thought and sentiment which can develop by means of learning foreign languages on the basis of labor and life
- (3) Deepen recognition to Japanese through comparing a foreign language and Japanese
- (4) Nurture basics of capability to use a foreign language on the basis of what is mentioned above

On the basis of the above four aims, Shin-eiken teachers have long endeavored to devise a variety of methods including “self-expression activities.” We have also created a unique teaching practice such as “peace education.”

We teachers would like to aim at having every student acquire abundant knowledge and skills even though we are placed in the most difficult ever climate of education.

In conclusion, Shin-eiken & KETG teachers’ message is:

Now is the time to disembark from “the same boat” of the government-controlled education policy, and pave the way to implementing “Student-centered” / “Learning for All” classes.

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