From Language to Literacy

: Rethinking College English Education

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Ⅰ. Introduction

It is needless to say that English has become a global language in the 21st century. The changing global economy and fast development of IT and media have expedited the spread of English in the past few decades. The phenomenal spread of the language is not limited to economy and IT-related fields. Other domains such as science, media, medicine, and tourism have witnessed the use of English as the means of international communication. Crystal(1997) states that 85% of international organizations in the world use English as official language; at least 85% of world's film markets are in English; some 90% of

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published articles in various academic fields are written in English. Particularly regarding academia, Hamel(2007) describes that 'English only' publication has become a norm in the international arena of scientific communication, mainly in periodicals. Concerning the dominance of English, he argues that what is at stake is 'whether the present day hegemony of one language in the multilingual field of science will give way to the state of monolingual monopoly, where English becomes the only allowable language of international and increasingly of national communication, possibly with irreversible consequences for other languages and their communities; or, whether the national and international communities of science will oppose multilingualism being dissolved into monolingualism and opt for plurilingualism as a way to enrich the academic field.(p.55.).

Despite being a threat to multi-lingualism, the extensive use of the English language in various sectors in society has dramatically expanded the number of the language users. That is, the number of those who use English as a second or foreign language, in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle respectively according to Kachru(1986), is by far higher than that of those who use English as a mother tongue in the Inner circle(the U.S, UK, Canada, and Australia), and such a tendency will be accelerated in the years to come to the extent that the diverse varieties of Englishes with multiple norms and systems will make us acknowledge English as a family of language(Crystal, 2004). The current pull of English from the outer and expanding circles, especially in the expanding circle, can be explained with two reasons. First, although it is not used as a tool of daily communication, the

demand for the language has increased due to the fact that English has consolidated the image of development, prosperity, and well-being in collaboration with various technologies and other IT-based communication tools in the global community. Secondly, the instrumental function of the English language as a gatekeeper to distribute social goods and resources has expedited its expansion in the expanding circle. While the actual use of the language for international communication is quite limited in the current state, the pursuit and possibility of further global networking, under the discourse of globalization, has justified using the proficiency of the English language as a means to assign educational and socioeconomic opportunities. In this process, the expansion of English education has become a converging educational policy discourse among many countries with sociocultural diversities(Block & Cameron, 2002).

The expansion of mandatory English education in schooling is justified to prepare young students for the global economy, thus giving them better educational and social opportunities and well-being. In Korea, such a policy rationale has realized into the primary English education for more than a decade now and subsequently various programs such as EPIK(English Program in Korea), which import native speakers of English as English teachers, TEE Project(Teaching English in English) to enhance language fluency. Besides, Korean's educational fever prompts interesting social phenomena such as children's 'early study abroad', 'education immigration' and 'sea-gull family', which reflects the collective mind-set of the public that tightly connects the English language with social attainments in the global

economy.

Although there are individual variations in English proficiency, such aspiration and fear derived from English continues in higher education. In fact, the instrumental motivation to learn English seems to be heightened during this time since university students have to prepare themselves for the competitive job market sooner or later. Although the acquisition of the English language or high score in English exams does not guarantee the desired success or social attainments, many students push themselves for harder language training, believing that higher TOEIC score may save them from the uncertainty of their future career.(The more details on the beliefs of college students will be discussed later through students' compositions on the necessity of English education in university.)

Despite their efforts, the reality is, however, that the fruits of various global communication in any sector often lead to the prosperity for some, while, for the majority, they lead to increasing inequity and allocation of resources that deepens stratification. The blind expectation attached to English, mixed with fear and hope, let students not delve themselves into critical questions about what such a global integration via English can cause and also for whose interest. And English education, with its pure neutral and instrumental position, has been negligent in tapping into the issues about and around English as a global language.

In rethinking the rationale of college English program and its future direction, the current status leads us to ask: If the spread of English and English education is so important and therefore indispensable to our

lives, how should we do it to make it benefit its learners? That is, how English education can be, or should be, done to make it an experience of gaining competence for global communication and expanding cultural sensitivity for self and others rather than a skill-based training under the ideology of linguistic imperialism of English(Phillipson, 1992)? Is there a way to let students master the language without being mastered by the ideology of the dominant language? Dare we ask whose interests are being served through global integration via English-only rule while learning English? Are there any possibilities to acquire the global language for wider communication and understanding of differences rather than to justify deepened gaps and disparities among and within groups and communities? Is there a way to make the learning experience work for those, non-native speakers of English, to emancipate them rather than binding them into the status quo? If English is a lingua franca for the present global society, can we serve for the benefits of the disadvantaged of the global community with the language instead of only serving the profits of some, such as very lucrative MNCs(multinational companies) and TNCs(transnational companies)? As a means to open a space to think about such questions above, I will review critical literacy in this paper with a hope that it may suggest a venue to revamp the current skill-driven college English language education.

Critical literacy, stemming from Paulo Freire(1970)'s critical pedagogy, focuses on questioning the social construction of the self in relation to the power relations in the society. Shor(1997) states that critical literacy is questioning the status quo, the hegemonic ideology, to

find alternatives, or other ways of making and understanding self and others. He continues "this kind of literacy--words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society--connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity"(Shor, 1997 p.1.).

Learning to read and write is a social action that shapes us to become assimilated agents within the larger culture; likewise, critical literacy can utilize the same function of literacy but to question the very process of sociocultural construction of the self and the society in terms of power relations in the society. Questioning the discourse of global English seems quite timely as the proposition of critical literacy provides us a way to reconsider how we are going to do English education in the time when English has become so dominant that it seems almost unthinkable not to do it in any educational sector. I sense the possibility of hope in critical literacy because it acutely knows and utilizes the value and function of literacy in shaping our minds. That is, critical literacy can give us not only literacy but also the awareness of values embedded in its use in the course of acquiring it.

To introduce more details on critical literacy, the following section will discuss the review of Ira Shor's(1997) 'What is Critical Literacy?' Based on this, a current status of college English education will be analyzed through an example of one English reading and writing course. Later, the implications and practical issues of doing critical literacy in ESL curriculum will be further discussed.

II. What is Critical Literacy? And Why Critical Literacy?

According to Shor(1997), the core of critical literacy is to raise awareness about language being a 'social force' that constructs and shapes our identity and then find a way to offset the process using the language in order to reconstruct ourselves and our cultures to the way we define. Why does language, which is so often defined as a tool, neutral and passive, of communication, draw attention in critical literacy? It is because language use is neither neutral nor non-partisan. To realize this, the first step is raising consciousness about the latent function of language. Shor asserts, "when we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world"(p.2.). In this sense, language education or literacy programs, is a space or agent that conveys the given social order and power relations to justify inequity and stratified distribution of social resources in the process of socialization.

Externally, standardized exams and unified curricula provide external validity and even fairness to the literacy education, making it look innocent and neutral detached from messy realities of power relations between races, genders, and classes. Educational myths that many literacy programs use for their propaganda always highlight that more education will bring you power and prosperity, despite the fact that the top 1% now control about 40% of the wealth of the US, even though high-school diplomas and college degrees are more widely distributed today than ever(Boutwell, 1997).

Education, with its official form, does not change the status quo; rather, it solidifies the status quo as the statistics show. Considering the

function of literacy education in socialization of the public, it is logical to assume that the traditional literacy education certainly has an important stake in this process of solidification of status quo. Such a myth of literacy education is quite fit to understand the spread of English education in the global context. That is, as English now functions as an economic apparatus of global corporatism(Singh et al, 2002), English education has brought about the illusionary belief that the acquisition of the English language will ensure power and prosperity to individuals in the global economy although the corporate realities "create profits, unevenly shared"(Cookson, 1999, p.6.). That is, more or better English education does not guarantee socioeconomic status and achievements of individuals in the global market. Rather, the disparity within the hierarchy of global corporatism could be extended and justified with the expansion of English education which solidifies the ideology of free competition in the already unequal race across the globe.

Under the circumstances, doing critical literacy means raising questions without detachment from the realities. From the outset, critical literacy proclaims that it is not neutral or innocent to power relations of the world. To the contrary, as Shor claims, critical literacy begins asking 'What methods help develop students as critically thinking citizens who use language to question knowledge, experience, and power in society?' The rationale of critical literacy is quite clear: to develop critical activists who can question and challenge 'received knowledge' and further inequity in the society. The following claims by Aronowitz and Giroux(1985) and Freire(1993) clearly state the rationales of critical literacy:

Critical literacy would make clear the connection between knowledge and power. It would present knowledge as a social construction linked to norms and values, and it would demonstrate modes of critique that illuminate how, in some cases, knowledge serves very specific economic, political and social interests. Moreover, critical literacy would function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge"(Aronowitz and Giroux, p.132.)

The need to master the dominant language is not only to survive but also better to fight for the transformation of an unjust and cruel society where the subordinate groups are rejected, insulted, and humiliated(Freire, p.135.)

In sum, critical literacy is a social practice, making familiar unfamiliar, in order to envision new hopes and possibilities for equity and equality and to build a more democratic society against this corporate regime. In doing critical literacy, Shor particularly values writing instruction due to its nature. That is, writing necessitates us to be detached, even temporarily, from knowledge, social situations, and one's own roles within the constructed self(or from the status quo) to find questions and new connections within. However, as the following section will describe, writing instruction can be used as a tool to produce docile workers who are conscious of following the rules and thus deprived of the ownership of learning.

Ⅲ. A College Reading and Writing Program: A Vignette

As mentioned earlier, most English curriculums are skill-based; the objectives of any English courses are to improve language skills such as reading, listening, speaking, or writing. When the emphasis is on improving skills, the course is naturally designed to introduce and practice language rules and other discrete linguistic points, reinforced by repetitive drills. In such a context, the importance of content diminishes since it is just a means to deliver the message(rules) effectively. The same precept applies when a writing/composition class has a skill-based curriculum. That is, various rules to write grammatically 'correct' sentences and paragraphs become the target of the course. For example, in a writing class, 'how to write an essay' is often introduced as follows:

In organizing a 3 to 5 paragraph essay, you should begin with an introductory paragraph that has a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph. Details of the thesis statement follow with specific facts and examples, which is also called body section. In each body paragraph, you need to begin with a topic sentence because in English you usually write a topic sentence at the beginning. Then, you write a last paragraph, which is also named concluding paragraph, and this is usually shorter than body paragraphs and it restates the main idea using different words. After you finish the writing, which is often called the first draft, you have to go through a couple of steps before you submit the essay. That is, the first draft should be reviewed to check and correct 'mistakes' in grammar and mechanics, such as adding a period or comma in the right place or capitalization rule.

When the essay is revised so that there are few mistakes, now it becomes the final product that is ready to be submitted.

With such a polished product, students may legitimately expect 'A' grade for the paper because they have adhered to all the prescribed rules. In the process of writing, English learners spend a great amount of time finding grammatical mistakes and correcting them as they count a lot in determining the score/grade of their final product. In this process, issues like students' ideas, voice, or ownership of writing become less or non-essential compared with meeting the prescribed rules on the writing checklist. Henceforth, the possibilities of epistemological development are ignored without being fully ripened in order to check subject-verb agreement or capitalization of the writing. Many studies on feedback also put emphasis on grammatical or mechanical corrections(Hyland & Hyland, 2005). They discuss whether feedback needs to be done by teacher or peer or whether feedback needs to be direct(i.e. to correct mistakes) or indirect(i.e., just to leave a mark to help students become a self-editor). Feedback has seldom discussed as a venue to ask critical questions or rethink one's 'taken-for-granted' ways of thinking. Things are quite similar when it comes to talking about approaches like process-writing or portfolio writing, which requires multiple production of drafts for the same essay topic(Blyler, 1987). That is, the emphasis is often made on micro-level revisions rather than on rethinking or reshaping ideas through critical inquiry.

Thus, ESL composition class produce docile ESL writers who are good at keeping the norms that are from the Inner Circle, and writing

becomes a cultural discipline that tames learners to become the obedient literate of the global language, not questioning but functioning to the given rules. Such a disciplinary practice hinders students from taking ownership or initiative of their knowledge making process. Rather, they are reinforced as passive agents of top-down banking education culture. Considering the instrumental motivation and pressure attached to the English language in Korean context, the educational practices cannot allow students to think about English education in any other perspective or purposes. However, as writing is, by nature, a creative task to stimulate writers to redefine, rediscover, and reconstruct the status quo, any types of suppression to the expression of the creativity, say via rigorous application of grammar checklist in writing, would be resisted by the agents in any way. 'Boredom' and 'frustration' students often express in ESL composition classes can be, to a certain extent, a means for resistance of agents who are deprived of their ownership in the process of creating and recreating world through words. Students may subconsciously express the frustration about being disempowered via detachment, indifference, or superficiality in class or in their writing. Maybe it is why most students do not show enthusiasm in English classes, especially those required ones where heavy emphasis is made on 'required' skills students desire to acquire. The desire and pressure for the good command of English, which belies their lack of engagement and enthusiasm in English classes, become even clearer when reviewing students' written compositions on the necessity of English education in higher education. A student's writing shows the dilemma between the necessity and lack of enthusiasm as

follows:

Purpose of university is to get a job. So I think purpose of studying English in university is also to get a job. These days, speaking or listening English is 'must have item'. But most of student's skill is not good when they graduated high school. So in university, practice them.

I expect that I speak English very well. I think speaking is most important and writing is important too because later I get a job and a lot of writing is required on the job. Frankly I don't like English but I have no choice. So from now on I accept this situation and do my best and I try to like English.

This composition clearly shows that English is understood as an object or skill('must have item') and English education means 'extended practice' of language skills for job preparation, which in fact resonates in many other students' writings. The student honestly acknowledges that she does not like studying English but instead of asking why it is not enjoyable, the student attempts to suppress her feelings and decide to conform her to the status quo as she states. So from now on I accept this situation and do my best and I try to like English.'

Another student expresses the instrumental effects of English education as follows:

This time is global. If you have English skill, you are successful. Also, when you take a trip, you need to have English communication skill. But if you don't have English skill, you are not successful. English is important language, but English study is very hard. English study needs patience. English study is habit, you need

> to make effort for English skill very well. It is important not only
> Korean communication skill but also English communication because
> English skill is important.

This composition also reveals that as with many other students, he is keenly aware of the importance of English as a way for socioeconomic attainment in the society, as succinctly expressed in the writing 'If you have English skill, you are successful'. In describing English education, however, he expresses the difficulty and frustration that require 'patience' to study English. This indicates that students consider ESL education as an uninteresting and painful process of skill training they need to overcome because the completion of such drudgery will set them free in the world of fluent global communication. However, it is also a myth that drill-based language skill training will make one fluent in communication just as it is a myth that fluency in English will bring about success and socioeconomic resources to all. It is because communicative competence can be developed only through understanding cultural differences and practicing communicative negotiations. If this is the case, how one can be engaged for better communication and cultural understanding? Is it possible to be in a language class where one can learn words and world at the same time and where one can have ownership in the learning process(i.e. learn to express what one thinks and acts) instead of being passively molded into specific linguistic norms and standards? As an attempt to find answers to these questions in rethinking ESL education, the implications of applying the premises of critical literacy, which utilizes the literacy as a way to reconstruct self and others, will be discussed

in the next section.

Ⅳ. Restructuring ESL Pedagogy: Implications of CL approach in ESL education

Hall(1997) states that the current changes as 'postmodern globalization' in that the new social and technological forces have created new relationship between communities. It is qualitatively different from the earlier form of globalization that used the apparatus of colonialism and was characterized as unilateral and top-down(i.e. from the colonizer to the colonized). Transnational interactions nowadays are multilateral and take place at diverse levels. Moreover, the amount of such transnational flow among people and ideas is innumerable due to the expanded social sphere via the cyber space, and as a result the hybridization of languages and cultures among and within communities has been an emerging phenomenon of this century. Under the circumstances, rethinking the direction and goals of English education is indispensible to equipping people with the right kind of global communication competence. In doing this, the possibility of hope illuminated in critical literacy seems in valuable to revamp English education in terms of both content and competence. Implications of the CL approach, particularly in college English education, are discussed in the following.

To begin with, language needs to be considered not only as a linguistic system for communication to a creative tool for reconstruction. The traditional English education has highlighted the acquisition of discrete linguistic parts(phonology, morphology, syntax) while ignoring

the role of social interaction and construction in the acquisition of a language. As a consequence, language education has been based on skill-based curriculum, thus making it like linguistic training to improve skills. To enrich language learning experience as an act of social construction and developing communicative competence, it is necessary to design theme-based language curriculum that utilizes diverse resources to create, critique, analyze and evaluate the resources using the language as a process of acquiring it.

Also, as mentioned earlier, the transcultural flows and linguistic hybridization make the adherence to the English norm attached to the Inner Circle problematic. That is, in order to deal with a varieties of Englishes, or World Englishes, which grow fast in Outer and Expanding Circles, English proficiency cannot be measured by whether one has acquired fluency in accordance to one type of norm. Instead, English competence in the era of linguistic hybridization should measure the ability to shuttle between English varieties(Canagarajah, 2010). That is, to meet norms of the postmodern communication, which are relative, variable, heterogeneous and changing, negotiating diversity effectively should be the prime criterion of measuring language proficiency.

As for practical applications for teaching, Canagarajah(2010) suggests that the goals of language education needs to be raising language awareness rather than learning a type of grammatical correctness. Also, learning strategies of negotiation is more important than the mastery of language. Negotiation here stems from raising awareness and sensitivity of contextual/cultural relevance, which is critical to shuttle between communities, becausee this is becoming the pattern of global communication

among various communities. Therefore, language education needs to allow students to be exposed to a variety of linguistic and cultural resources while providing them with multiple opportunities to develop more interactive and collaborative language learning environments through on-line and off-line channels.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, the current status of English and English language education has been examined. It seems clear that current English program is not very effective to help students develop communicative competence that is required more and more in this fast changing communication patterns(i.e., a variety of Englishes) because current English education is still heavily based on skill-based linguistic training attached to the norm of a certain group of English speakers(e.g. the US. or UK). In addition, such an educational practice does not satisfy learners in that it discourages students from having the ownership in learning and communicating, which is shown by the contradictory feelings expressed by students through the desire and indifference in college English class.

In analyzing the phenomenon on the basis of the premises of critical literacy, it can be explained that the decontextualization of literacy education, or literacy education that does not reflect or engage important issues that influence learners' lives, is a means to solidify the status quo and thus disempowering learners to become docile citizens

who are tamed to conform to the current unequal power relations. Applying this to English education, the prevalent skill-based English education emphasizes the acquisition of linguistic rules of English attached to English spoken by a certain group of people, i.e., native speakers of the Inner circle. In this process, the content of learning is treated as non-essential, and ESL pedagogy detaches students from interacting with the fast changing communicative realities in terms of the use of the English language and also discourages the cultivation of students' ownership and voice to explore, interpret, and deal with various sociocultural resources as a process of reconstructing self and others.

As communication across borders is becoming more important and faster than ever in the current society, learning English to develop communicative competence that embraces critical thinking and understanding is critical for successful inter-communication taking place via cyber spaces as well as face-to-face interaction. Moreover, as critical literacy advocates claim, the content of English literacy pedagogy needs to stem from the realities learners are facing in both local and global contexts. If so, education of English, the lingua franca, will be an experience to connect worlds through words and critically view and reconstruct self and others for the sake of new hopes and possibilities in the globalizing society.

〈국문초록〉

비판적 문식력을 통해 본
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영어를 사용한 의사소통이 그 어느 때 보다 더 중요해 진 요즘 사회에, 영어에 대한 욕구 및 학습에 대한 부담은 점차 커지고 있고, 이에 따라 영어교육은 점차 확대 되어가고 있다. 하지만 현재의 영어 교육의 방향이 급변하는 초국가적 (transnational) 현실과 이에 따른 다변화적인 의사소통에 요구되는 능력, 그리고 의식적 변화 및 문화적 다양성에 대한 수용 등을 다루고 있는가에 대해서는 많은 문제점이 있다. 본 연구에서는 이러한 영어 교육의 문제점을 비판적 문식력 (critical literacy)이 지향하는 전제들을 통해 다루어 보고자 한다. 특히 대학에서의 영어 교육 현장의 고찰을 통해 영어 교육이 단순히 언어의 기술적 습득의 장이 될 때의 문제점을 학습자의 내러티브 (narrative)를 통해 간략히 살펴본다. 마지막으로 이러한 현실적 문제를 해결하기 위해, 즉 영어를 언어적 지식으로 이해하고 습득하는 것이 아니라, 영어 비판적 문식력 (critical literacy) 함양을 통해 비판적인 사고 및 이해 능력 또 다문화적인 차이에 대해 폭 넓은 이해를 쌓아가는 경험의 현장이 되도록 영어 교육의 나아갈 방향에 대해 모색해 본다.

주제어 : 비판적 문식력, 세계화, 의사소통, 대학영어

〈Abstract〉

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With the increase of cross-cultural communication via English in the globalizing society, the demands and pressure for English education has grown rapidly, and English education has accordingly expanded at all levels to meet such demands. However, the expansion of English education in reality seems lacking in, or even irrelevant, to certain extent, to help English learners develop the communicative competence that is required to deal with fast changing transnational communication patterns and flows that require deeper cultural understanding and sensitivity about differences. This study attempts to approach the problem on the basis of the premises in the critical literacy (Freire 1970). In addition, through a college English course and the narratives of students in the course, the problems embedded in skill-based English education are examined. Later, the implications of implementing CL approach in college English education are discussed in order to make learning experiences in English education as one that enables one to expand critical thinking and cultural understanding which is the foundation of developing communicative competence required in society.

Key words : critical literacy, globalization, communicative competence, college English education

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