

Korean Mothers' Strategies for Children's English Education : The NEST versus NNEST Dichotomy

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I. Introduction

The marginalization of Nonnative English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) in English language teaching (ELT) is controversial. NNESTs strive to receive professional legitimacy and are often placed in second-class

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positions even if they possess better qualifications and experience than Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) (Kubota & Lin, 2006). NESTs are generally accepted as the ideal linguistic and cultural model (Li, 2003; Mahboob, 2005): Korea is not an exception in having embraced this educational paradigm. Korean parents prefer NESTs and often seek white North American NESTs to be their children's teachers (Chang, 2005), based on linguistic, social and cultural attributes, and socio-linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

White NESTs, with the esteemed variety of North American English, often face unexpected teaching challenges and find that they have a limited agency in Korean ELT. Many Korean parents and Korean ELT professionals think that NESTs in public schools or private language institutes are a sign of increased national and English educational power: however, white NESTs are also perceived as temporary teachers with only a partial role in English education in Korea (Park, 2006) that contradicts the acquisition of the full agency of their preferred status.

The present examination is a pilot study of the NEST versus NNEST dichotomy in preparation for a subsequent grounded theory and a micro-ethnographic study that will examine the role of agency and social, cultural, and economic capital in shaping Korean mothers' English teacher preferences. This current pilot study describes mothers' preferences in order to frame the findings in terms of English teacher selection strategies for their children in order to identify what beliefs influence personal choices and to conceptualize how Korean ELT can work to dismantle the fallacy of the native-speaker. The later study identified the complex factors that create the misconceptions found in this study as a factor in micro-language policy planning.

II. Overview of the NEST/NNEST Division in Korean ELT

The status of the NEST serves as the counterpart of the Korean NNEST; NESTs are seen as contributing to the process of 'internationalizing' Korea as they are understood to play a principal role in the initial exposure to English (and its associated cultures) in pre-schools and elementary schools. They also represent ongoing cultural and communicative exposure in middle schools and beyond. Korean NNESTs assume the fundamental instructional roles of teaching grammar and test preparation courses. To be viewed as more effective than NESTs, Korean NNESTs need to teach long hours in the ELT "trenches" so that students can successfully pass essential exams that promote the "employment opportunity" reputation of schools and institutes.

Korea does not generally perceive white NESTs as serious educators even when possessing academic credentials and experience because the prevalent socio-cultural image of NESTs is that they are unqualified teachers in Korea; however, NESTs are specifically valued for the exposure that they offer young learners in communicative interaction with native speakers and western socio-cultural norms. Korean parents value Korean NNESTs for middle school children because their children need to prepare for college entrance exams that require a mastery of reading and listening skills over writing or speaking skills. Consequently, during middle and high school, mothers value NNESTs as their goals are limited to the achievement of an optimal score on standardized English exams by their children. When students enter college, the focus changes back to communicative objectives and the value for white NESTs returns because

college students need to acquire productive career skills (or those necessary for further education) and also contemporary post-secondary English-medium instruction policy these days.

The result of these two different language emphases creates a dichotomy in the different language value that Korean mothers place on white NESTs and Korean NNESTs. This preference for white NESTs is significant as those in hiring positions at schools and institutes would likely argue that they have no choice but to hire white NESTs for communicative classes and Korean NNESTs for grammar and test preparation classes. It is understandable since they operate as a market demand based on commercial entity. If they do not hire white NESTs with a North American accent, Korean parents would opt to enroll their children in another school where they could obtain the existing common NEST/NNEST instructional division. This situation perpetuates the status quo and myth of the native speaker: however, ELT professionals need to re-examine the benefits of the current situation.

III. The Study

Semi-structured 90-minute interviews with fifteen married Korean women were conducted from a list of open-ended questions to foster natural dialogue. First, participants were given a demographic questionnaire to complete. After completing the questionnaire, a series of interview questions about the women's background were posed based on the provided questionnaire information. Following the demographic questionnaire, each participant was asked about personal goals for their children's education

and the qualities that they desired from an English teacher. Then, the participants were asked to define “native speaker” and “non-native speaker.” Finally, each participant was shown a series of sixteen potential teacher candidate photographs with no biographical data at the end of the interview. The sixteen photos were chosen from the internet and represented visibly different ethnicities and included equal numbers of men and women. There were equal numbers of older (40's-50's) and younger (20's-30's) images of individuals. A mother was then asked to choose which photo they would select as the most preferred English teacher for her child and the reasons behind her choice. Additional discussion to clarify the provided answer was offered if required.

The data examination uncovered a series of commonly known strategies that mothers use to manage their children's English education in Korea based on their intrinsic value perceptions of white NESTs; subsequently, these strategies are discussed along with possible misconceptions that perpetuate the NEST versus NNEST dichotomy. However, these strategies are not the main intent of this study. The significance of this study is to bring these practices up for reflection. The goal of this paper is to raise awareness on how to dismantle the fallacies that drive the NEST versus NNEST dichotomy in Korean ELT.

IV. Strategies

1. Strategy 1: Certain NESTs Are Better

All of the participants (except one) chose a photo of a white candidate

as the ideal English teacher for their children in the picture selection activity. This result, matched with the personal definitions of participants for a native and non-native speaker, suggested that Korean mothers regard ethnicity as an essential criterion to grant “native speaker” status. The interview discussions further confirmed that participants believe that white teachers from Britain, Australia, and North America (BANA) reflect the definition of a native speaker. A North American is most highly regarded among these countries, while someone from South Africa may not be regarded as an ideal native speaker in the minds of Korean mothers.

Many mothers confirmed that the role of NESTs in their children’s schools is not to teach reading or grammar: consequently, Korean teachers are employed to address those subjects. NESTs are valued for the English exposure that they provide and are simply expected to interact with the children through activities such as playing games, doing arts and crafts, or performing physical exercises. This expectation demonstrates that mothers perceive the white NEST’s role is restricted to a student-centered type classroom that fosters time for interaction and conversation to develop the speaking and listening skills of their children in a comfortable and stress free environment.

2. Strategy 2: Pronunciation Matters Most

Mothers were strongly concerned about their children’s English pronunciation, and the preferred pronunciation was a North American accent. Without any interview question related to pronunciation, seven out of fifteen participants brought up the subject of pronunciation as a cardinal condition for the selection of an English teacher. The mothers’ preference

for their children acquiring a North American accent reflects the Korean social perception that if one can achieve a North American accent, such an individual is respected for their esteemed variety of English; consequently, the low status for Korean NNESTs among mothers was based on the issue of pronunciation.

Mothers preferred NESTs because Korean NNESTs did not satisfy their expectations due to increased academic and social competition. It indicates that mothers fastidiously judge the ability of teachers based on pronunciation by both NESTs and NNESTs. Near-native like pronunciation is an essential qualification for NNESTs and also a tool to identify whether someone had been abroad or not. NNESTs that have studied (or lived abroad) offer the desired pronunciation as well as the socio-cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries to the classroom.

3. Strategy 3: NEST versus NNEST Teaching Division

The mothers revealed that they have a systematic and strategic approach to the selection of their children's English teacher based on the child's age and academic demands at school. Parents prefer a white NEST when children are young; subsequently, this reflects why kindergarten and elementary school age private language schools often prefer white NESTs. Parents prefer a white NEST for speaking; subsequently, the private language schools meet the market demand to remain competitive with other language schools. For example, several mothers employ different types of teachers for each child. Older children learn English from a Korean teacher, while younger children go to a kindergarten or tutor where NESTs offer exposure to western thinking and culture. Ideally (if they can

afford it) mothers seek to employ a NEST to develop communicative proficiency and NNEST to prepare their children for grammar focused exams when their children approach middle school.

V. Discussion

1. Examining the Dichotomy

These three strategies used to select white NESTs or Korean NNESTs show that the particular goals of parents are based on a socio-linguistic and racial bias. A white NEST that lack teaching qualifications and experience may not necessarily be the ideal teacher model (even when instruction is limited to communicative skills). NESTs are desired for their socio-linguistic capital and symbolic value in Korean society and are the preferred educational model to achieve communicative competence.

The first strategy, that white NESTs from BANA are better for teaching communication skills, is unfounded. Logic indicates that being a white NEST has no correlation to an innate ability to teach English communication skills because a new teacher without training or experience lacks a declarative knowledge of English despite any innate procedural knowledge. Additionally, limited contact with a NEST in a classroom does not suggest that Korean learners transform the limited input of language and culture into intake. If the student is fortunate, they may subsequently be offered an opportunity (in class, with a friend, or through overseas experience) to turn what was internalized into further linguistic or cultural output; however, the limited NEST classroom exposure does not typically

offer the students enough output opportunities to attain the desired high communicative competence.

Parents (mothers in particular as they control most of the children's educational decisions) need to be educated through non-commercial and commercial mediums about the perceived value of NESTs and NNESTs for Korea's national ELT goals. They need a consciousness-raising medium that provokes questions and doubts about the automatic confidence they endow any white NEST from BANA. The existing Korean ELT system compels parents to designate increased amounts of their income to private institutes or private instruction. Korean mothers are yoked into the social race against time in the critical period for language acquisition, to attempt to give their children near-native English proficiency. However, their children's interaction with and teaching from white NESTs once or twice per week for an hour or two does not guarantee the desired language acquisition or communicative proficiency despite the high-cost of NEST instruction.

This zeal for English and near-native pronunciation is a result of a broad range of factors. The mothers' stated hopes disclose a desire that second language acquisition is obtained through osmosis and that contact with white NESTs results in "contracting" part of the NEST's properties; however, this is unproven and the hope that second language acquisition at a young age is similar to first language acquisition is misleading.

Intelligent and well-educated parents are constrained by the current ELT curriculum and the race against the "critical period" in the competition to have their children achieve more than other children. Students practice the rote learning of grammar for exams with Korean NNESTs while mothers acquiesce to the dominant social model and

available ELT option of private language schools (and/or personal tutors) that market the role of the white NEST as the most appropriate for communicative fluency and near-native pronunciation. Most mothers accept what is offered withiatand near because they believe that they have few alternatives and need to believe that the current ELT system works. Those who believe that the system is ineffective are consumed with earning money to access white NEST instruction or overseas schooling with the hope of giving their children more social leverage. These two beliefs perpetuate the myth that native-speaker status ensures successful language acquisition.

The second strategy for teacher selection (in regards to pronunciation and communicative skills) is based on sociolinguistic prejudice. The preference for white NESTs with a North American accent (in particular a U.S. accent) implies assumed implications on the value of the socio-linguistic status of the user. Mothers believe that an individual with a particular U.S. accent will instill a native-like pronunciation in their children through exposure. English proficiency with the valued North American pronunciation is one factor in the perception of being a “good” English speaker and acceptance to a “good” university that will promote socio-economic mobility. Understandably, mothers form assumptions and beliefs based on their existing knowledge of the Korean social and educational contexts. These assumptions about the value of a particular accent perpetuate the myth of the native speaker and (in particular) the North American native speaker that perpetuates an instructional division between NESTs and NNESTs as well as the unequal pay scale system in Korea. White BANA NESTs are frequently paid more per hour than Korean NNESTs (regardless of qualifications) as parents believe white

North American NESTs will ensure the acquisition of an esteemed variety of spoken English by their children. The situation artificially increases the demand for NESTs.

Parents believe that the status of a NEST ensures their pedagogical background and teaching experience; however, many white North American NESTs come to Korea as novice teachers. A native procedural knowledge of English does not endow declarative knowledge to explain the grammatical elements of English or an understanding of good pedagogy even for communicative classes; in addition, it also does not innately provide information on how to assist learners to overcome pronunciation difficulties or explain the phonetic and phonological aspects of English. When children are young, it is assumed that they will simply pick up the language and accent through exposure and imitation. Yet, the ability to assist learners in overcoming difficulties with common pronunciation problems would be effective with young learners as well as older learners. In addition, the preference for North American NESTs (based on pronunciation) discriminates against many qualified NESTs from other countries such as the Philippines.

Parents need to be informed from entities such as ELT organizations, publishers, and recruiters that a particular variety of English pronunciation is not automatically picked up by learners and that having a qualified instructor is essential for speaking and grammar instruction. Parents also need to be aware of the negative feedback loop that results from their support of the unequal pay scale (based on race, nationality, and the variety of spoken English) as they willingly pay more for a white NEST. The more that unqualified white NESTs learn through commercial advertising and SNS that they can earn a comfortable wage in Korea with

no teaching qualifications, the more unqualified white NESTs will come to Korea to teach. This leaves qualified Korean NNESTs fighting for jobs and struggling to earn a living as they are often paid less than NESTs.

The third strategy of the instructional division between NESTs and NNESTs for two distinct English language objectives is costly. Learning a language and its six skills and modalities (reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and pronunciation) need to be taught in an integrative way. One skill area cannot be severed from the language and taught in complete isolation if the objective is English proficiency and communicative competence at all levels. The role of the standardized tests in Korea drives the school curricular; however, it would be naive to think that the Korean testing system can be changed. What can be achieved instead is increased awareness on the ineffective nature of the current NEST and NNEST instructional division. The classroom approach to teaching communicative competence can be altered as parents, educators, and legislators realize that students will have the language skills to perform well on standardized tests if the students are taught English proficiency at all levels in an integrative way.

2. Moving Beyond the Status Quo

NESTs and NNESTs need to share responsibility in the current situation and begin to make personal choices for change. First, NESTs need to become more responsible to Korean ELT by expanding their understanding of Korean education and professional development. They should teach conversational English as well as prepare themselves to teach grammar and test-prep courses. This can help move grammar teaching and test-prep

courses to a somewhat more communicative language teaching (CLT) model suitable for Korea. This would further support Korea in the development of an adapted CLT model suitable for Korean ELT with short and long term objectives. Korean standardized language testing and college entrance exams have started to change and currently incorporate a speaking and/or writing assessment in their standardized and university entrance exams.

Additionally, Koreans that intend to go overseas are required to improve writing and speaking proficiency for foreign university admissions because TOEFL and IELTS are of increased assessment importance. The demands for English speaking and writing proficiency are increasing in Korea. This top-down phenomenon impacts the bottom-up supply and demand chain: parents and students will require a distinct form of instruction to successfully meet standardized national and international testing requirements. If the buyers (parents and students) want something, the seller (the schools and private language schools) will adjust their hiring practices and classes to meet the demand to retain and attract new customers in a highly competitive market. Qualified NESTs that assert their test-prep teaching skills (matched with communicative teaching) will foster a successful test performance and communicative ability.

NNESTs should consider themselves as qualified language teachers and not settle for second-class positions (compared to white NESTs). NNESTs are valued for a specific familiarity and ability to teach standardized tests in Korea; however, professionally trained NNESTs with high English proficiency offer more than teaching grammar and the "tricks" to pass standardized exams. NNESTs are superb examples of successful English learners and are often trained and qualified educators that share a cultural

and linguistic foundation with students. These shared factors are significant in classroom interaction and for reducing affective filters for younger students: subsequently, NNESTs represent an ideal model of a proficient English speaker.

Parents should recognize their agency in their child's English education and consider teaching qualifications instead of race or nationality, to be the foremost condition for the choice of the child's school and teacher. ELT human resource professionals need to consider parents' short-term and long-term goals for their children and the changing standardized testing system in Korea as well as the growing exposure of Korean ELT to CLT. Public school and private language school directors with awareness of these issues need to consider the longevity of their institution through the employment of teachers based on teaching qualifications, experience, societal goals, and long-term national goals instead of short-term customer goals. In doing so, school directors can assist in transforming the perceptions of ELT in Korea.

VI. Conclusion

This discussion argued that the dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs marginalizes both groups into limited teaching functions. This study examined Korean mothers' beliefs about NESTs and NNESTs and the commonly known strategies behind their children's English teacher selection. The discussion showed that mother's perspectives are based on socio-economic and racial reasons that are underscored by the notion of a strong form of the CPH. Based on the findings of this pilot study,

suggestions are made for a range of ELT associations, commercial entities, NESTs, and NNESTs dismantle the misconceptions that fuel the preference for white NESTs. This paper encourages practical and realistic changes through individuals and groups as a basis for larger changes over time. Change that is consistent and supported by the larger ELT profession can result in significant changes in the perception and unequal value of NESTs and NNESTs in Korea to improve the quality of English language education.

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〈국문 초록〉

한국 어머니들의 자녀 영어교육 전략 : 원어민과 비원어민 교사의 이분법적 구도

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한국인 비원어민 영어교사들은 보다 나은 원어민 영어교사와의 경쟁구도 속에서 보다 나은 직장을 구하기 위해서 애쓰고 있다. 이러한 어려움은 원어민 교사는 말하기와 쓰기를 잘 가르치는 반면 비원어민 교사는 듣기와 읽기, 문법 등 시험관련 과목에 더 적합하다는 이분법적 사고의 결과이다. 이에 본 연구는 한국 어머니들과의 인터뷰를 통해서 영어교육의 어떤 부분에서 원어민을 혹은 비원어민 교사들을 선호하는지 살펴보고 어머니들이 자녀의 영어교사를 선택하는 과정에서 어떠한 전략을 사용하는지 살펴본다. 이러한 전략을 분석해 봄으로써 과연 어머니들의 어떠한 믿음과 관점이 그러한 선택을 하게 만들었는지 파악하고 이에 따라 한국의 영어교육계가 원어민교사에 대해 가지고 있는 잘못된 관점을 어떻게 수정할 수 있는지에 관해 논의한다.

주제어 : NEST, NNEST, nativeness, 원어민, 비원어민