

The Value of Bilingualism in Korea

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## Abstract

Bilingualism is one of the most current issues in the globalized world. Many types of bilingual education are implemented around the world. After reviewing the benefits and values of bilingualism in society, this paper explores some issues about bilingualism in Korea and offers some suggestions to language education policy makers in Korea. First, language education should pursue a variety of language education rather than focusing only on English. In addition, public English education should be modified in regards to bilingualism as well as the equality of access to English. Finally, the Korean government should take more aggressive measures by providing appropriate bilingual programs to embrace the increasing multi-ethnic families living in Korea, keeping in mind the value of bilingualism to society.

*Keywords:* bilingualism, inequality, diversity, English, language education policy

### The Value of Bilingualism in Society

While the world is being globalized and interconnected culturally and economically thanks to technology, trade, immigration, and travel, the bilingual population in the world is increasing and it is up to over half of the world population (Baker, 2011). English is used as an international language as a lingua franca worldwide, and the undeniable fact is that English is the most dominant and powerful language all over the world. Baker (2011) pointed out that the dominant English language might endanger minority languages and cultural diversities of the world. Though there are a variety of languages in the world, we seem to accustomed to dichotomize the languages: English vs. non-English. Therefore, bilingual seems to refer to those who can use English as well as their mother tongue implicitly, at least in Korea.

Language involves many complex factors such as age, gender, economy, politics, cultures and society. When we look into bilingualism carefully, it is found that bilingualism is related to invisible hegemony and conflicts. Namely, a major language group is usually treated as prestigious while a minor language group is treated as underprivileged. Given that English is dominant in the world, using English can be regarded as having power. Korea is no exception. English is a great tool to get a better job and better education opportunities. Instead of enjoying the advantages and values of the blessed bilingualism, Korean society has focused on only English. Therefore, I'd like to share some current issues about the significance of bilingualism and implications to education policy makers in Korea in order to change language education policy in Korea in a more future-oriented way.

First, education policy makers need to pay more attention to the advantages of bilingualism. Bilingualism gives cultural diversity to a society compared to a monolingual society. In terms of economy, bilinguals are likely to be preferred in employment. According to

Grin et al. (2010), employers regard the employees' foreign language skills as valuable (as cited in Baker, 2011) and we commonly see the notice *We look highly upon individuals fluent in more than one foreign language* in job markets. In addition, bilinguals have some cognitive advantages compared to monolinguals in terms of divergent thinking and creativity (Baker, 2011). Finally, bilinguals may have different views and ideas of the world because each of their languages influences "the content and process of thinking" (Baker, 2011, p. 167).

Given those advantages of bilingualism, Korean society has some problems to solve in regards to bilingualism. First, Korean society has focused only on English education. Considering the globalized world, the Korean government realized the importance of foreign languages in the mid 1990s. Unfortunately, the Korean education policy makers emphasize only English and English language is one of the most influential subjects in a school curriculum. As I mentioned above, as English is recognized as the key to success in Korean society, we have fervor about English education from babies to adults. As a result, the other foreign languages such as German, French, or Japanese as well as Korean are relatively ignored.

It reminds me of *linguistic imperialism*: It refers to inequality produced by the most dominant language in the world (Phillipson, 1992). This is in line with Kachru (1986)'s assertion that "English provides linguistic power" like the Aladdin's lamp: if we learn and use English, it is believed that we can take many advantages from it (as cited in McKay, 2012, p.17). In other words, English, the dominant language, is interrelated with political and economic issues, and English has the power and hegemony with it. Given that English is the most powerful and influential language in the world, English linguistic imperialism keeps producing inequality giving priority and unfair advantages to those who can use English language. It is time for education policy makers to establish language education policy considering the value

of bilingualism or multilingualism rather than focusing on only English. Language education policy should not be swayed only by politics or economics; rather it should encompass the value of bilingualism or multilingualism.

It is also needed to talk about the inequality of access to English learning. Ever since English has been adopted as a subject in elementary school, the private after-school program including English kindergarten is booming (Park, 2006, as cited in McKay, 2012). Na (2012) reported that 69.4 percent of three-year-olds, 83.4 of four-year-olds and 84.6 percent of five-year-olds are learning English. So, parents feel burdened to afford the English education fee. According to Kim (2012), Korea's private expenditure on private education, including English education marked 2.8 percent of gross domestic product in 2011 and this amounts to three times the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 0.9 percent. In contrast, the expenditure on public education reached 4.7 percent, which is lower than the OECD average of 5 percent and much lower than the Sweden average of 6.1 percent. Korea shows extremely imbalanced expenditure on private and public education. It means that Korean people are likely to rely on private education: it leads to inequality to learning English due to the gap between the rich and the poor.

The Korean government should establish some initiative public English language programs to embrace the underprivileged students. Some private elementary schools or international middle schools are implementing strong forms of bilingual education such as 'immersion', however, they are limited to only privileged people. If the government should not take actions, the underprivileged would get trapped in the vicious cycle of inequality. Language education policy makers should try to encompass the underprivileged people who have difficulty with access to English education by providing high-quality English language programs at public

schools.

As we have more multi-ethnic families living in Korea, the interest in multiculturalism is increasing. In terms of linguistic imperialism, Korean is a dominant language to them and they might experience inequality due to a lack of Korean in Korea. It is good news to hear that the government is seeking programs to provide equal opportunities in education and living considering the increasing number of students with multiculturalism (Kim, 2012). The Korean government should keep trying to help them learn Korean and catch up with the school curriculum by providing appropriate language programs according to the situation including their L1 and Korean proficiency level as well as their living and learning environments.

Considering that there are many communities for language minorities in Korea, it is advisable to do Two Way or Dual Language Program in those regions. For example, the policy maker may consider providing Two Way program with Chinese and Korean in *Guro*, where there is a Chinese community and Two Way program with East Asian languages and Korean where there are many East Asian communities in rural areas. One of the benefits of bilingual education, drop-out rate decrease needs to be considered, too. It shows that students from language minorities or multicultural backgrounds are more likely to drop out (Krashen, 1999, as cited in Baker, 2012; Kim, 2012). In the case of Korea, the ratio of drop-out is 1.58 percent of middle school students of interracial families, 0.8 percent from non-multicultural families, as of February, 2011 (Kim, 2012).

By providing customizing bilingual language programs, it is also expected to reduce the ratio of drop-out. Bilingual programs can affect multi-ethnic students in terms of not only their academic learning but also their non-cognitive outcomes including attitudes, self-esteem, and social and emotional adjustment (Rolstad et al., 2005, as cited in Baker, 2012). Similarly,

many statistics and studies show that bilingual programs contribute to lessening the language minorities' drop-out (Krashen, 1999, as cited in Baker, 2012; Kim, 2012). In sum, bilingual programs can contribute to harmonious society by letting the underprivileged use the bilingual bridge that connects them to the outside world while allowing them to feel proud about their languages and cultures.

It is evident that bilingualism has many benefits and values in many ways. Korean education policy makers need to think about bilingual programs encompassing a variety of foreign languages free from only English traps. They also need to establish the language education policy to provide equal language program opportunities regardless of their socio and economic status to prevent the vicious circle of inequality. Furthermore, given that there is an increasing number of multicultural and multiracial students in Korean society, more attention should be paid to them in order to give fair opportunities in education and living.

Finally, yet importantly, the language policy makers should keep in mind that language is a resource not a problem when they set up new language education policy. Namely, they should establish language education policy encouraging bilingual education with a variety of forms appropriate to the learners. Additionally, bilingualism should be understood in terms of not only linguistic knowledge and cultural experiences, but also bilinguals' different features from monolinguals in a unique linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural aspect (Butler & Hakuta, 2004).

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